The Silent Bells

CHAPTER ONE

N.D. WILSON

1

TOO MANY DRAGONS

North of Mexico, south of Canada, on a stone jetty stretching out from the moonlit banks of the freshwater sea called Lake Michigan, below the gaping stone ruin of the Order of Brendan's Ashtown Estate, there was a girl standing as rigid and frozen as a pole. Her short hair was darker than the night sky above her and cinched back tight enough to be painful. Dry blood encrusted a small bandage high on her brow which she should have removed days ago. Her arms were crossed over a leather jacket belted with a revolver on one hip and a long black knife on the other. Her cheeks were wet, but she did not wipe them. Her vision was blurred, but she did not blink.

No matter how hard she tried, Antigone Smith could not see the future. She couldn't even see tomorrow.

Moon-silvered waves slapped at the stones beneath her feet with a cheerfulness that Antigone found disrespectful. How could the wind and the water carry on like nothing had happened? Like the world hadn't changed? How could the moon and the stars remain unaffected?

Rupert Greeves was dead.

It couldn't be real. But it was. His breathing had stopped with a long sigh barely more than three hours ago. His big tense body, swathed in bandages, had sagged into the small hospital mattress like mud, completely relaxing for the first time since Antigone had met him. Antigone had grabbed his heavy scarred hand. She had shaken his shoulders. She had screamed for help. She had slapped his face and thumped her fist on his chest before collapsing on top of him in grief. And she had remained there until the others had pulled her away.

Only a few nurses remained at Ashtown, and they had all tried everything to wake Rupert, to rekindle life in the man who had always been too willing to die for anyone. And then broad Alan Livingstone had spoken solemn words of departing that Antigone had been unwilling to hear; and he had raised the white sheet over Rupert's dark face.

Alan's blond sons, George and Silas, had both looked startled by the brokenness of their father's quaking voice.

Antigone drew in a long lake-chilled breath and bit her lip in anger. The pain and the salty taste of blood on her tongue spoke for her fury better than any words could. Her Keeper, the last Blood Avenger of the Order of Brendan, the Avengel, and the closest thing to a living father that she and Cyrus had left…was now gone. Antigone wanted to yell at him. She wanted to kick him in the shins until he knew how furious she was. How could he quit on her? And now, of all times, with Cyrus missing and Ashtown smashed. If Rupert was going to die, he should have done it when the transmortals had pinned him like a butterfly to the great wooden door in the hall and Babd Catha, that horrifying skull-faced storm crow, had probed his chest with two long black talons. Dying then would have been understandable. Or when Brother Niffy hadn't noticed the knife in Rupert's side and had dropped him on it while trying to get him down from the door. Antigone could have channeled her rage at Niffy if Rupe had died then. He could have died after the first awful infection. Or the second fever. But not this. Not now. Not after three weeks, while Antigone had been sitting with him, watching his steady breathing and telling him about her day and tomorrow's fears. Not after she had finally stopped worrying and praying. Not after the big man had opened his eyes and looked at her with a smile. Not after he'd begun to speak again.

"No defeat…in death."

His voice had been low, but stronger than a whisper. And then, just like that, he'd been gone.

"No." Antigone said aloud. "No, no, no!" It was inexcusable. Fresh tears spilled down into the corners of her mouth, down over her jaw, down her neck. She turned her face up toward the stars and sniffed.

"No!"

Rupert was wrong, and she had never been angrier at him. Why would he say that? No defeat in death? Maybe not for him. But this *was* defeat. This was the end. For her, for Ashtown, for the Order of Brendan. For Cyrus, wherever he was, even if he did make it back alive. There had been too many friends wrapped in sheets in the chapel already, and now, with Rupert ready to join them, hope itself had died.

The Ordo Draconis had invaded Ashtown with a mob of transmortals that had risen up through the Burial of Babd Catha. The cost had been high, but the dragons had been repelled. Now, with Rupert gone and Cyrus and the Dragon's Tooth absent, a handful of transmortals could waltz through the front door and finish what they had started with no trouble at all. And how long would it take Radu Bey to realize that fact?

There were too few defenders and too many dead. Robert Boone. Gunner. John Horace Lawney VII. The Captain. Nolan had yet to open his eyes since throwing his body over Cyrus when Wrath, the stone giant, had exploded into shrapnel. Jax had been crushed by a stone and was now in a wheelchair. Jeb had shattered his leg. Diana had somehow survived broken ribs that had punctured her lung. Niffy had burns and gashes on every bit of visible skin.

Antigone, Dennis Gilly, Big Ben Sterling, and little Hillary Drake had been the only mortals to get through the sacking of Ashtown without major bodily harm or disappearing through the Burials like Cyrus. And that

WHERE IT ALL STARTED...

simple fact added to Antigone's anger as much as any loss. Standing on the jetty, with all her limbs working and her lungs and heart fully functional, Antigone felt dirty. Guilty. Profoundly alone. She should be the one hurt. Or dead. Or gone. Rupert and the others should still be here.

If Rupert could hear her right now, she'd…she'd…call him an idiot and beg him to come back. Didn't he understand how much she needed him? How much they all did? Why would he do that?

Antigone sniffed her weepy sinuses empty and, because she was so very alone on the end of the stone jetty beneath the moon, she spat into the water. How very Cyrus of me, she thought. And as she did, a silent shape slid through the darkness above her, as silent as an owl but much, much bigger.

Antigone instinctively pulled back the hammer on her revolver while the shape banked in front of the moon, revealing itself to be a triangular plane with blunt corners. Bank completed, the plane touched down on the lake's surface, skipping toward her until it stopped no more than fifty yards away, sending a flock of foaming waves to break on the stones beneath Antigone's feet.

Still silent, the craft crept all the way to the jetty and dropped an anchor from its tail. By the light of the moon, the plane looked to be made entirely of pale wood planks. A cockpit hatch opened, and a large man climbed out onto the wing and threw a coiled rope at Antigone. Instinctively, she grabbed it, crouched, and tied it off to a thick iron ring. When she rose again, the man was on the jetty beside her.

Antigone knew not to show fear. She also knew that this man was no mere mortal. She had every reason to be afraid.

He was dressed in something like a leather kilt below a thick, woolly sweater, much too heavy for a late summer night. He wore boots almost to his knees capped with bulging woolly socks. A rigid beard that might be blond and might be white reached down to his chest, but the skin on his brow and his cheeks looked smooth and young. The sides of his square head were shaved and a braid as thick as Antigone's arm jutted down between his shoulder blades. He was leaner than Gilgamesh—Antigone's reference point for large transmortals—but maybe only an inch or two shorter. Antigone only stood up to his short ribs, but her gun was cocked and ready, and the moon sparkle in the big man's eyes seemed more like laughter than aggression.

"I expected no greeting," the man said, and his voice vibrated her bones like a foghorn, but with the cheerful confidence of a bugle. "I'll need a meal and a bed, but guide me to the Captain first. Words before food."

"I'm sorry," Antigone said. "Who are you?"

The man laughed. "Bold doorkeepers these days! But I suppose the small ones can be allowed some brass in strange times. I am called Wiglaf the Scylfing by those who know, and I answer the Captain's call, though by the looks of the rubble up on that hill, I seem to have missed the battle."

"Yes," Antigone said. "You did. Radu Bey and his stupid order of dragons smashed us with bombs before opening a portal into one of the Burials and invading Ashtown from below. I'm afraid the Captain is dead." She lowered the hammer on her revolver as a sign of goodwill, but the man paid no mind. "I'm Antigone Smith, by the way. Which means you probably hate me. Not that it matters anymore."

"I have no cause to hate Smiths, although I hear many do." The man gripped his beard in a thoughtful fist. "But the Captain does not die. I am not calling you a liar, but how can that be?"

"The transmortals cut the charmed piece of cloak out of his chest and then cut off his head."

A groan rumbled out of Wiglaf's chest. "Grim news indeed. My hunger fades. Which of the foul beasts did it? And do you know which Burial was opened? Have forces inspected the portal?"

Antigone hesitated for a moment. She had no reason to trust this strange man who had just landed a silent wooden plane on the lake well after midnight. But then again, she had no reason not to. Rupert was dead. What else mattered?

"The portal closed," she said. "But not before my little brother disappeared through it to no one knows where. The Burial was Badb Catha's, one of the oldest. And they just blew it open. So many transmortals came out. Too many. All following Radu in and out of his dragon form. He killed the Captain. One of us killed a transmortal called Crescens. And Cyrus killed some lady called Anann the Morigan. Babd Catha, too."

"Babd! The storm crow herself? Killed? Not captured or buried?" Wiglaf cocked his large head like a small child, coping with confusion.

"Killed," Antigone repeated. "My brother, Cyrus had the Dragon's Tooth. He cut off Babd's skull head when this kinda thick and very crazy Irish monk jumped on her back and she fell on top of Cy. Then Cy went after Radu, or Azazel, the dragon. He even chopped off the fork in the dragon's tongue. That's when Radu and his mob bolted. Cyrus jumped on the dragon's tail and rode along."

Wiglaf burst into a laugh that hurt Antigone's ears.

"This little brother who is now gone? He took Babd's head and Azazel's lies? I shall mind myself around that one. Oh, I have missed too much." Wiglaf's voice rose and fell like the waves around him. "The slaying of Babd Catha deserves a song and a bard and a month of feasting. Many weeks more to mark the brave Captain's loss. He is a brother I will mourn, though his curse is finally lifted. There is more to this tale, and I will hear it all inside, over a full plate and a foaming mug. Take me to the young Avengel, the fearless one with the serious face. They called him Greeves."

Antigone sagged. She opened her mouth to speak, but instead her lungs quaked and her throat closed and new tears sprang loose.

"Oh," Wiglaf said. "I am sorry, small one." He set a lead-heavy hand on her shoulder. "He was also lost in the battle?"

"After," Antigone said. "Tonight. Just hours ago."

"Tonight?" Wiglaf asked. He looked at the moon, gauging its height above the horizon. "Tonight is still young. Stop your tears and take me to his bed. I would look on his body."

Not all rain is created equal. Afternoon monsoons flush desert canyons with the flashiest of floods; dew and drizzle turn mountain ranges green with sheer persistence; tropical cloud forests remain lush with nothing but the constant touch of cold, barely beaded vapor. All falling and floating moisture is impressive, but the jungle monsoon is more potent than all its precipitous brothers and sisters. In the jungle, entire lakes fall daily from the sky, raining down in bullet armies nearly infinite in number, punching through thick, green leaves, pummeling dark soil and soaking every crawling thing that lives below. Those are the torrents that give the rain forests their simple but honest name.

Cyrus Smith had never been in a real rain forest before, and he never wanted to be in one again. He was tired of being wet. His skin had known the cool damp air of northern California, crisped by the ocean and fog-chilled in the mornings. He had grown used to the sticky summer days of Wisconsin. But now, through no fault of his own, he knew the jungle's moods—wet in the morning, steaming and impossibly sticky by midday, drowning in deluge every afternoon.

Three weeks. That's how long Cyrus had been trudging north through thick and endless jungle green, climbing mountains, sliding through sandy mud, crashing through lush undergrowth, crawling up vine-encased slopes. Three weeks spent sheltering from the rains every afternoon, pitching leaf tents over massive tree roots—roots that were often patrolled by feisty ants or wasps. Three weeks since he had regained consciousness with a fit little gymnast in a baggy mail carrier uniform looking down at him with a symmetrical cut on each cheek. And the only reason he hadn't died after chasing Radu Bey back into his grisly lair and then fleeing out of a portal into a hillside jungle temple made of bones was because that mail girl, aptly named Mercy, had tucked the Dragon's Tooth and its broken bamboo shaft handle into Cyrus's limp hands while he'd been unconscious.

Death hadn't been possible while he held the tooth.

Cyrus struggled to make sense of what had come before the jungle. He thought he remembered most of the battle in Ashtown. At least, he remembered waking the Brothers Below and watching Wrath and Justice hurl transmortals around like toys and sling Phoenix's Reborn out over Ashtown's walls like small stones. Until Babd Catha had blown Wrath up like a ten-ton stone grenade. He remembered snatching the Dragon's Tooth from Oliver's hands and the powerless slap of bullets punching through his chest right afterward. But he didn't remember what Oliver had done or where he had gone. Cyrus remembered seeing Rupert pinned to a wooden door and Diana hurt on the ground. He remembered how the black-bladed weapons had come to life in his hands when he held the tooth. He remembered the crow-feathered skull-monster's talons digging into his shoulder and piercing his throat before Niffy had jumped on her back and Cyrus had lopped her head from her shoulders. Those wounds from Babd's black talons were the only ones that still hurt him, throbbing in his throat and shoulder whenever he used his left arm.

After Babd, when Cyrus had chased the Radu dragon down into the Burials, he struggled to piece the sequence of memories together in a way that made sense to him. The dragon had kept on hurling fire from the tip of its spiked tail, which had been distracting. But Cyrus thought he remembered the dragon dragging him through deep water and through a shattered stone wall into a Burial with a doorway in one wall that opened onto a room built of living bodies. In that room, he had found Mercy on an altar made of men. In that room, there had been other doorways, one of which apparently led to jungle and dampness without end.

When asked, Mercy had been unwilling to discuss the room made of bodies, but her reaction told Cyrus that it had not been a dream or a hallucination. Radu Bey used living people like bricks in the walls of his lair. And the temple in the jungle that Cyrus and Mercy had careened into had been made of stacked skeletons. Or, perhaps, they had only become skeletons with time. Perhaps Radu or someone like him had built that place with living walls as well, long ago.

Cyrus dug the toe of his soggy boot into a steep muddy slope and scrambled upward, clawing at the dirt with broken fingernails until his hands found a vine. His keys banged against his collarbone, strung around his neck on invisible Patricia. With the vine's help Cyrus crested the slope and sat down on a narrow ridge with his legs out in front of him. He was panting and dripping sweat, and the snapped bamboo handle on the Dragon's Tooth dug into his stomach, but he was too tired to adjust it. To his left, the ridge rose into a high peak. To his right, it did the same. He was perched in the bottom of a V. But directly in front of him, the slope, almost a cliff, fell out of sight into a deep valley. Across the valley—more mountains, more jungle, more wet, all the way to the horizon. Three weeks of exhaustion, of confusion, of frustration, of wet, made Cyrus wonder if death might have been a more comfortable option.

Giant dragonflies, even bigger than those Rupert trained at Ashtown, had shown themselves at first, when Cyrus and Mercy had still been near the temple made of stacked skeletons where they had tumbled into this place. The dragonflies were mostly red or green, with wingspans three feet across. But Cyrus had seen two blue dragonflies that were significantly larger, closer to five feet across and with abdomens thicker than his arm. Once, he'd heard, and then watched, a big blue dragon hover while loudly munching on a parrot. The bird's vivid green feathers had fluttered down from the jungle canopy into Cyrus's hair. But he hadn't seen or heard another one of the insects after the first couple days of hiking, and he didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, because he didn't know if the insects had a master. At least they hadn't been interested in eating two exhausted North Americans. Cyrus knew the insects could have stripped him to the bone if they had wanted to. Back in Ashtown, Rupert had fed his dragonflies whole chicken carcasses, but the chickens had to be launched in the air to get the dragonflies interested; and once launched, not one of them ever hit the ground until they snowed down in little flurries of splintered bones. When the big dragon insects were on patrol, it was a brave bird that dared to enter Ashtown airspace.

Cyrus spat down between his feet and tried to wipe the sweat off his brow onto his sleeve. But his sleeve was already soaked. He had just added more dirt to his face and more salt to his already stinging eyes.

Behind him, Cyrus could hear Mercy's short gasps as she scrambled up the steep slope.

Cyrus blinked his burning eyes at the sun, just above the mountain on his left. He still didn't know where they were, exactly, but he'd guessed at a few things.

They had to be close to the equator. Day after day, the sun rose and set near the middle of the horizon, with only the slightest variation. And the Southern Cross was strong in the sky every clear night. Cyrus was also pretty sure they were still in the western hemisphere, which meant Central or South America. This conclusion was based entirely on sloths. He was pretty sure sloths weren't African or Asian, and he'd seen dozens of the long-clawed mossy fur-bags in the trees over the last couple weeks, although he'd absolutely refused to eat one. Killing a sloth just seemed like a nasty thing to do, even for two kids stranded in the jungle, scrounging

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for protein. The animals were just too slow for eating them to be fair. And when he'd gotten close enough to one of the smelly little guys to think about it, the animal had looked straight into his eyes like a sad puppet, wondering if Cyrus was going to pick up his strings and help him move.

When Cyrus had told Mercy this, she had laughed at him. When he told her which hemisphere he thought they were in, she had asked why it mattered.

It didn't. Not really. But he had found it just a tiny bit encouraging. It meant they could walk all the way home without a boat if they just kept heading north and then followed the coast. It was technically possible. Even if it took a year, the land could get them there. Mercy had not found that thought encouraging at all.

"Hey," Mercy gasped behind him. It was the first word she'd spoken to Cyrus since breakfast. "Hand, please?" The first time she'd asked for help that week.

Cyrus leaned back and held out his arm. Mercy grabbed his wrist tight and surged up, dropping to the ground beside him. Side by side, they stared at fold upon fold of jungle hills and ridgelines and mountain tops, all the way to the horizon. The slope in front of them would be another brutal descent. The slope across from them would take an entire day. Or two.

"Bad word," Mercy said. Cyrus didn't respond. The pretend curse had been funny the first time Mercy had used it twenty days ago. Now, not so much.

"You know," Mercy added after a moment. "Talking won't hurt you.

"Nothing to say," Cyrus said.

"You have to be thinking about something."

"Do I?"

"You do."

Cyrus shrugged. "You could always tell me more about that place made of bodies." Cyrus waited. "How'd you get there? Why on earth did you ever go inside? What were you thinking? What did Radu Bey say to you?"

Mercy didn't answer.

"Right," Cyrus said. "Well, let me know when you feel like helping me figure out what's going on and how we got here."

A raindrop the size of a bird's egg slapped Cyrus on the knee. Two more followed. Drops began drumming slow percussion on wide green leaves all around. The percussion would not remain slow for long.

"Bad word," Cyrus said. "Rain's early. We need shelter."

"None up here," said Mercy.

Thunder broke like a wave above them, spilling echoes between the ridgelines. On cue, an entire ocean of water began to fall. Patricia hated the rain as much as Cyrus did. He could feel her adjusting herself higher and tighter around his neck, sheltering under his jaw.

Cyrus pushed himself off the ground and tried to hop to his feet. His right leg worked fine, but his left heel plowed downhill, slipping through sandy mud.

"Cy!" Mercy grabbed the back of his shirt, and his weight jerked her to her feet. For half a heartbeat, Cyrus thought he might be fine. And then he heard his shirt tear.

Cyrus dropped into a baseball slide—left leg out, right leg bent with his foot tucked beneath him. Roots and stones tore at the back of his legs while branches and leaves lashed at his face. Wide leafy plants snapped as Cyrus picked up speed. He dragged his fingers through the slick mud on both sides, but the slope was too steep and getting steeper. Ahead, it disappeared completely…over a cliff.

Bad word, Cyrus thought. Bad, bad, bad, bad.

Before the cliff's edge, Cyrus twisted onto his stomach, digging his knees and toes into the slope, clawing with his fingers. Which is why he launched backward off the cliff's edge, arms and legs flailing.

Well, Cyrus thought. Maybe this is simpler. He didn't notice that he was yelling.

The rain seemed to slow down around him. Or was that time itself slowing down? Or just Cyrus failing as fast as the rain. Could the Dragon's Tooth keep him from splattering on stone?

Mounted in the cliff face fifty feet below the edge, a net had been strung across a fence of twisted poles. Cyrus almost tore through it on impact, snapping one of the poles, launching another pole down the cliff to its doom, and punching his right leg through the net up to his hip. Mud and stones poured down after him while he bobbed and swayed in place, so tangled and bound that he couldn't even look down to see what was below him. A moment later, Mercy tumbled off the cliff above him in a spill of mud and rock and leaves.

Mud reached Cyrus's face. A stone hit him in the thigh. But Mercy flipped and landed cleanly on her back in the net about ten feet from Cyrus. Another pole snapped. The entire net swung down, banging Cyrus upside down against the cliff face. The bottom was still hundreds of feet down, on a lush valley floor striped with a meandering silver stream.

It looked like a pretty place to die. If only it hadn't been raining.

As Cyrus's head pounded with blood, a waterfall across from him came into focus. It was so tall that the water disappeared into vapor before it reached the bottom.

"Mercy?" he asked.

"Yeah," she grunted.

"You alive?"

"Barely," she said. "You okay?"

"Been worse," Cyrus answered. "I think. And I know where we are. I think."

An enormous jewel-blue dragonfly rose up through the rain on throbbing wings until it hovered eye-to-upside-down-eye with Cyrus. The insect cocked its melon sized head and clicked thorny metallic jaws. The wind from its wings battered Cyrus's face, and he closed his eyes. The thing might decide to eat him, but Cyrus didn't have to watch it happen.

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Antigone stood at the foot of Rupert's hospital bed with Wiglaf beside her. In the light, Wiglaf's beard was clearly blond, even if ghostly. The braid down his back was darker.

Jeb Boone, using just one crutch, hopped into the already crowded room, working his way around the wall until he stood beside his younger sister. Diana hadn't eaten much since burying her father, and Antigone thought her freckled cheekbones were growing more pronounced every day. She'd talk to Jeb about it. No one else had a chance of getting Diana to do anything. Although even he might not have much of a chance. Diana was still recovering from a concussion and a punctured lung, along with the losses of her father, Cyrus, and now Rupert. Pain filled Diana's normally sparkling eyes. It had been days since her freckled sunbrowned face had managed a believable smile.

Brother Boniface Brosnan stood at the head of Rupert's bed with his thick arms crossed and his best Niffy sneer directed up at Wiglaf, a sneer that had not wavered since Antigone and the transmortal had first entered the hospital room, interrupting the monk's prayers. The sleeves of Niffy's robe were rolled up high and his mohawk was still patchy around the oozy scalp burns and blackened scabs that the fearless monk had earned in the battle for Ashtown.

"What's going on?" Alan Livingstone banged into the small room like an elephant—a small elephant next to Wiglaf. "Sir, who are you and by whose authority do you disturb this bedside?"

Wiglaf didn't answer. Instead, he gripped the bottom of the sheet covering Rupert's body and jerked it free. Crumpling the sheet into a ball, he tossed it into Alan's chest.

Rupert's dark and once powerful torso was clothed only in scars and bandages—at the shoulder, around his ribs, his wrists, his biceps. Below the waist, he wore the bright white button flapped pajama bottoms given to every patient in Ashtown's hospital wing. The black boat crest of Brendan was crudely stenciled on the hip.

"Bandages off," Wiglaf said. "All of them." Drawing a knife from his kilt pouch, Wiglaf began to slice bandages off Rupert's feet. Dropping the stained cloths on the floor, he inspected the wounds.

"Fine," Wiglaf said and moved up to Rupert's side.

"We can do this properly later," Alan said. Wiglaf ignored him.

"The Scylfing, is it?" Niffy asked. "Wiglaf? You expect me to believe you lugged your Norse carcass all the way here from Greenland just to help us dress a body?"

Antigone knew Niffy's mood, and she understood it. Like the Irishman he was, Niffy was looking for a fight. Any fight. Even one he would quickly lose.

"The Captain sent me a seagull," Wiglaf said. "But I am difficult to reach, even for a bird. And that difficulty was by the Captain's own design. I came when I learned of need. I came to help old friends. As I can."

The monk uncrossed his blistered arms and moved toward the much bigger man. "I'll thank you to step back, mate. Let the ones who loved their Avengel dress the man for his grave."

"You're a fool," Wiglaf said. "I owe Greeves a debt I could not soon forget. I will pay what I can now. Show me where the storm crow struck him."

"Storm crow?" Jeb asked.

"Babd Catha," Antigone said. She moved up the side of the bed. "Right here." She reached for the bandages that swathed Rupert's shoulder and chest. Peeling them up, she revealed two open craters in Rupert's flesh, surrounded with overlapping halos of dead gray skin almost a foot across.

Wiglaf sagged at the sight. "What have you done with the crow's body?" he asked.

"Burned it," Niffy answered. "On a pyre in the courtyard with all the other villain dead."

"Her head?" Wiglaf pulled at his beard and then poked the brittle skin around Rupert's wound. "Please tell me you did not burn the feathered skull?"

"We set it in the collections below," Alan said from beside the door. "Beside the skull of a giant also slain with the Reaper's Blade long ago."

Wiglaf clenched a fist slowly until two knuckles popped like tree branches.

"Did no one tell you?" he asked. "Have you nothing in your libraries of that devil's power? Babd Catha does not remain dead. She claims another body, as she has done often enough before. Her spirit will grow in your Avengel until his skull is bare and sprouting feathers, until he draws breath only to serve that demon."

Wiglaf backed away from the bed and turned to leave the room.

"Wait," Antigone said. "Please. What do we do?"

"What you should have done weeks ago when you first knew the source of his wound," Wiglaf said. "If you wanted to see him live again,

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and live steered by his own will. If you want this wound to stop spreading before it enslaves his corpse, you must grind the storm crow's skull to meal and let it nourish living creatures—fish, birds, anything. She may rise again. But not here. Not now. And not in him."

"But you said tonight was still young." Antigone fought to keep her voice from breaking. "You asked to see him. I thought you were going to help him, you know, wake up."

"Wake up?" Alan Livingstone stepped beside Antigone and slid his heavy arm around her shoulders. "Little sister, your Keeper is now more awake than we. He walks green fields far from here, with his face toward the warmest sun of all."

"He may," Wiglaf said. "And he may not. He has not yet been gone three nights. He could still be roused by some among his fellow creatures. But even if I rouse this man from his stillness, and his soul turns back from the journey, that rot in his chest will only kill him again within the hour. That would be cruelty, not healing. And I have not the knowledge, the touch, nor the faith to turn back the storm crow's touch and mend what she has marred."

"Well, if you don't," Antigone said, "who does?"

END OF CHAPTER 1

☞ A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear Readers,

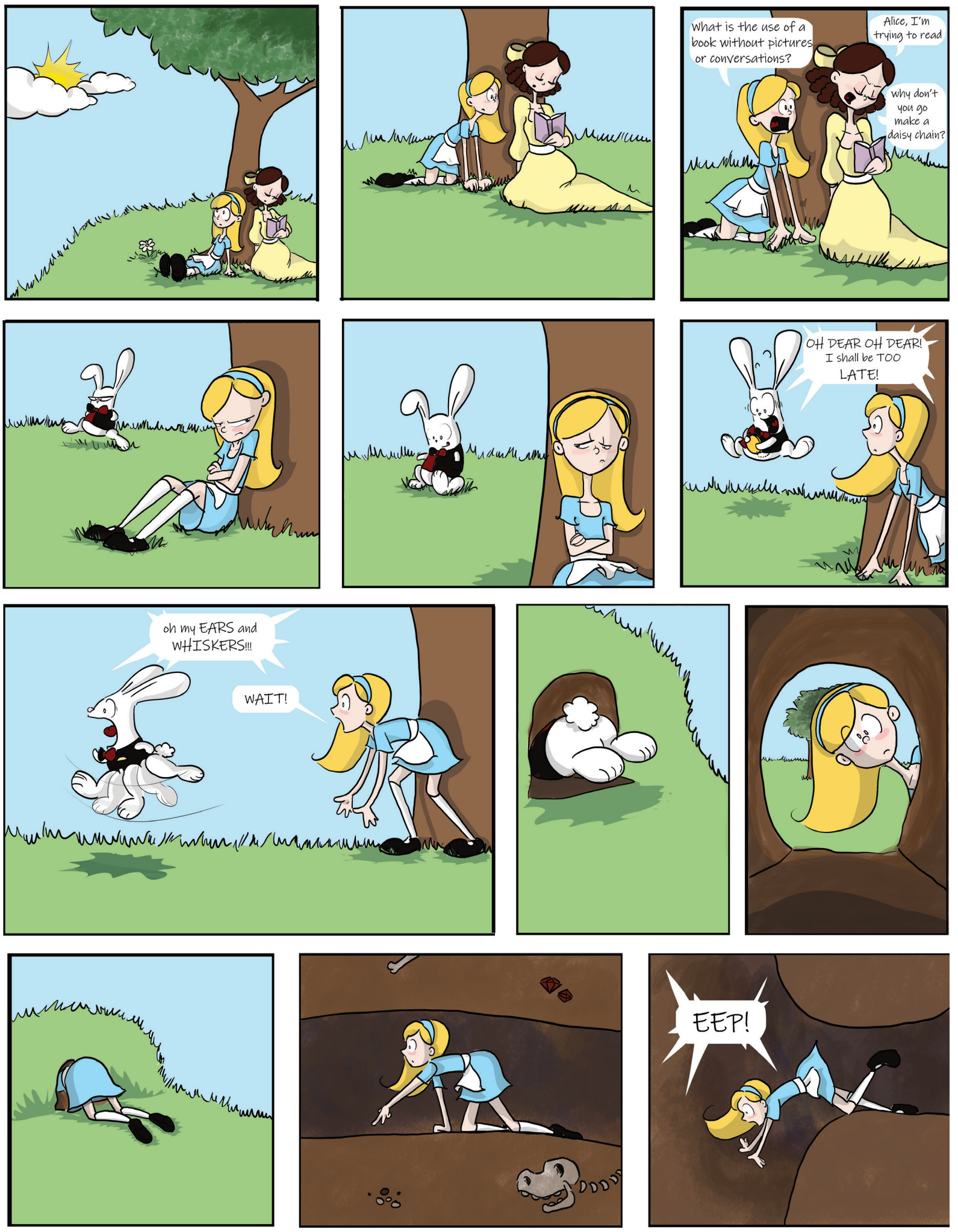
First, thank you for your patient commitment to the Ashtown Burials series and for your support of this serialized edition of the The Silent Bells. Without you this series would not be gaining its conclusion, and the Smith siblings would be stuck in indefinite limbo.

Publishing a first draft as I finish it is a new and thrilling experience for me—like riding a bike down a steep gravel hill with no hands. There will, no doubt, be some errors and mistakes made along the way. So, please bear with me along this journey. If I am ever able to compile these chapters into a bound book, a great deal of editing will occur before publication. But for now, thank you for joining me in the kitchen while I cook. I hope you enjoy this story as it comes out of the oven, hot and fresh.

Cheers,
N.D. Wilson

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN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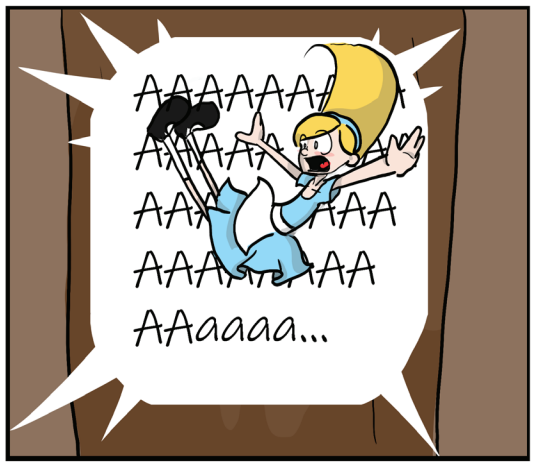

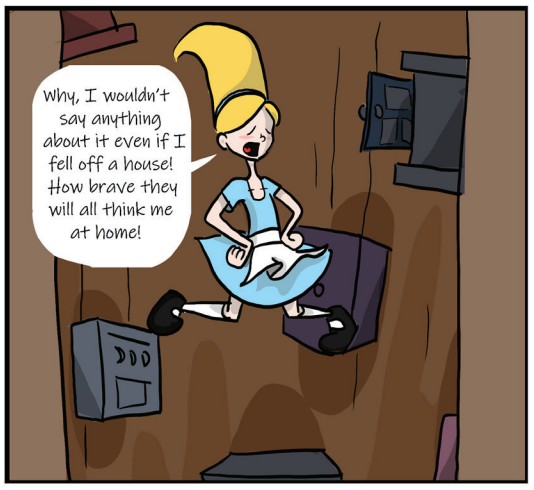

Let me see, that would be 4000 miles, I think. I wonder what longitude and latitude I've gotten to?
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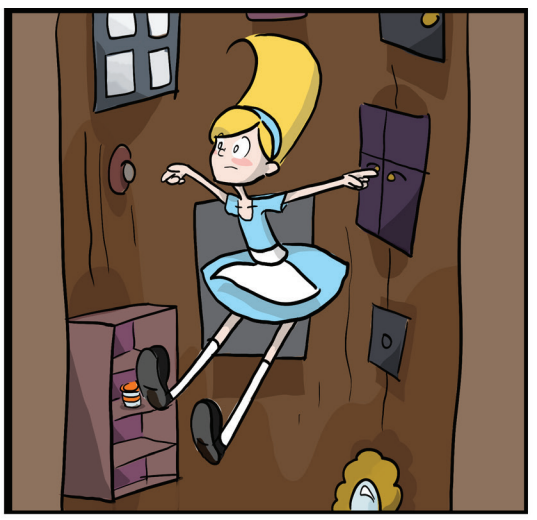

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The Silent Bells

CHAPTER TWO

FALSE HOPES

Antigone Smith lugged Babd Catha's gaping, oversized skull down the wide, rubble-filled hallway toward Big Ben Sterling's kitchen. She was carrying it by the eye sockets, three fingers in each one, and the bone was icy cold to the touch—numbing her fingers and sending unnerving electric chills up her arms with every waddling step. Even hollow, the skull was as heavy as a large watermelon, and after two flights of stairs and several winding hallways, Antigone was ready to throw it against a wall and run away screaming. But not yet. If she slowed down now or took a break, Alan Livingstone might decide to do more than stroll along behind her and actually put a stop to her quest.

"You know," Antigone grunted, glancing back over her shoulder, "You could always help."

"You're grieving, Antigone," the big man said behind her. "And grief can make us desperate. And foolish."

The skull's black scalp feathers rustled against Antigone's shorts and bare legs. Her entire body trembled with goose bumps, and her stomach tumbled liquid distress. But she wasn't about to give up now.

"Desperate, yes," Antigone said. "But more foolish to do nothing."

Not much farther. She could see the swinging kitchen door ahead.

"Antigone." Alan Livingstone had followed behind her the entire way. Now he came alongside her. "I'm afraid I can't allow this. God knows, I'll miss Rupe as much as any man, woman, or child who knew him. But we cannot turn to witchcraft. Such things are what the Order should exist to combat."

"It's not," Antigone grunted, "witchcraft."

"Because a giant, undying Swede said so?" Alan said. "We cannot trust any transmortal on these matters. Not even one we've known for years, let alone a man we've never met."

"The Captain trusted him."

"So Wiglaf says." Alan reached for Antigone's shoulder, but she ducked away, trying not to drop the heavy skull as she shuffled around rubble and banged through the swinging door into Big Ben Sterling's kitchen.

The kitchen had once been a glorious place with massive ceilings and a wall of glass overlooking the green slope down to the grass airstrip and the vastness of Lake Michigan. Now the wall of windows and half of the ceiling were completely absent. Wind off the lake swirled dust around once gleaming tile floors. The only thing separating the kitchen from the great outdoors was a berm of stone rubble and glass. Fire Island, once the culinary heart of the Order of Brendan, where Sterling had overseen dozens of cooks manning dozens of burners three times a day, now held only a single fire, and it was not a traditional burner. Not even close.

Antigone dropped the skull and kicked it clattering across the wide stone tiles toward Fire Island. Big Sterling slid two pieces of firewood—splintered chair legs from the dining room—into a blazing campfire on top of the kitchen island. Then he placed a heavy lid on an iron pot hanging from a tripod above the fire.

With one more poke at the flames, the cook turned to face Antigone. Big Ben's barrel torso was perched above two thin, curved, and bouncy metal peg legs that made him look as much like an overweight faun as he did a pirate. Sterling swayed as he moved to examine the skull Antigone had dropped on his kitchen floor, jingling his golden bell earrings with each step. The big man scratched his black netted beard and gave Antigone a curious smile.

"What have you brought me, girlie?" he asked. "No meat on this one. And I doubt a bone broth from her would be wholesome at all."

"Don't be gross," Antigone said, flexing and shaking her tingling hands. "I need to burn all the feathers and smash the skull into meal, which I guess means powder. Do you have something that can do that?"

"Meal is more sand than powder," Sterling said. "And I might have something. Fire for the feathers is easy enough, just wait till I've cooked for the giant Swede snoozing in the dining hall. Does an old cook get to ask why we're grinding this devil skull?"

"We're not," Alan said. "I really must assert my authority here. We will not be doing any such thing."

Sterling raised his eyebrows. "Well then," he said. "Are you, in fact, the ranking member still on this Estate?"

"I am," Alan said.

Antigone sighed, faced the South African, and crossed her arms. The Keeper from the Carthage Estate was not small, far from it, and a genuinely good and conscientious man by Rupert's report and her own experience. But Antigone really didn't care. Not now. Not after three weeks of tidying ruins and not making plans and waiting for Rupert to recover and for some word of Cyrus, all while Phoenix and the Ordo Draconis could return for the treasures and Burials of Ashtown at any moment. If they knew Cyrus was gone and Rupert was dead, both groups would probably arrive that very night.

"Mr. Livingstone," Antigone began.

"Alan, please."

"Mr. Alan Livingstone," Antigone said. "Sir. Jeb Boone is a Keeper of this Order. Diana Boone is a Keeper. They both hold the same rank that you do."

"Duration gives me seniority," Alan said.

"With all respect, sir, you know I like you and appreciate that you are one of the only people to return to try and help us when Phoenix and the transmortals all attacked. But you were too late, and you are not a leader I will follow. Ever. For three weeks you've been doing nothing, leaving us all exposed here, sitting in this giant target on top of what the transmortals want more than anything in the world. And now that a friend of the Captain's gives us some hope for Rupert and also the horrifying possibility of Babd Catha taking over his body, you really want me to do nothing? Well, I won't. I know it's terrible for me to talk to you like this, but you're not Rupe, and you don't have what it takes to lead right now. You don't. Not in these circumstances. Maybe no one does. But that includes you. I could always fly to Lemon Chauncey's boat, where my mom and Dan are. Chauncey is a Sage. She might be crazy, but she outranks you and would be totally fine with me doing this. But flying there and back would be ridiculous and would waste so much time that we just do. Not. Have!" Antigone paused, breathing hard, a little

surprised at herself, heat twitching in her temples.

Another Cyrus moment, she thought. Another reason to want her brother back. She was becoming too much like him with him gone. She preferred being the more restrained and mature Smith.

Antigone had expected a little anger in Livingstone's eyes, some contraction in his bearded jaw. Something. But the man was stone. "Or," Antigone said. "I could always renounce my vows to the O of B. Then I wouldn't have to listen to you. That would work, too. Or—"

Antigone heard Sterling's bells jingle right behind her. "I think he gets your point, Miss Smith. Would be wisdom not to press your luck any further."

The door between the Dining Hall and the Kitchen eased open. Diana Boone leaned in, her pony tail folded in half high on her head.

"Tigs?" she asked. "What's going on? Was that you yelling?"

"No," Antigone said. "That was me explaining. And I'm not done."

"We're moving tomorrow," Alan said. "I didn't want to move Rupe while he was still… on the brink. I've collected all the Avengel keys along with Rupert's map to the Burials. We will be bringing them with us. This place is indefensible now. Hiding and keeping the keys hidden with us is the best we can do until the Dragon's Tooth returns. *If* the Dragon's Tooth returns. In the days ahead, all we can hope for is that some remnant of the Order survives, a seed for the future. And that not all the Burials will be opened when we have left." Still calm, Alan cocked his square head to the side. "Anything you would like to add to your condemnations, Miss Smith?"

"That makes sense," Antigone said. She bit her lip. "And I'm sorry I insulted you. I shouldn't have. But—" She nudged the skull with her toe. "This is happening. Unless you decide to kill me."

"Tigs…" Diana said.

"You, too, Di," Antigone said. "I'm smashing this thing into sand, wrapping it in cheese, and feeding it to Leon. If he's close enough to hear me. Explain to me how that could possibly be witchcraft."

"Leon?" Alan asked.

"The giant snapping turtle," Diana said. "Leon is long gone."

Antigone shrugged. "Maybe. Lilly the Bull would work, too. Or one of the bears in the crypto wing of the zoo. But something alive is eating this skull."

Fire crackled on the island, and the iron lid clanked on its pot. Big Ben Sterling jingled as he moved to check it. For a long moment, only the fire spoke. And then Alan turned, walked toward Diana, and slipped past her into the Dining Hall. Diana grimaced worry toward Antigone and then followed after Alan, letting the door swing closed behind her.

"Well," Sterling said. "You may have gotten your way, Smithling, but I do suspect you'll pay for it later. Livingstone will grill the Swede now. See to your business before he changes his mind. Use a stone bowl and hammer to start. Flour mill when she's in pieces."

More than twelve thousand feet above the surface of the pearly blue Pacific, a bird as sleek and sharp as a reaper's scythe sliced through the cold air without effort. She was half asleep, swirling up and up on a tower of rising air like a kite with no master, no worries, and no fear but the water far, far below her. She had been in the air without touching down through two new moons, and a third was approaching. She could float weeks longer if she liked. But she did not like. She was nearing her favorite place of rest on the globe, a place unknown to most creatures. She was ready to warm her wings in the hot sunlight far below her, to let both halves of her brain sleep at the same time, to steal fish from foolish seagulls. To be still after months of motion.

Rousing the sleeping half of her mind, the bird tipped her sharp wings and slid sideways out of the tower of rising air. Descent was instant. She knew she was still miles from her destination, but she had more than enough height to glide to her target without a single flap of her wings. She could see it already on the very edge of the blue horizon, the large carcass of a steel ship that no longer sailed, permanently nested in the embrace of a crescent-shaped island fringed with palm trees.

It was a ship with no sailors to shoo her away, where the decks were green with gardens, where seagulls could be robbed without risking the water herself. And this time, it would be more than a place a rest. This time, she would nest.

Daniel Smith was snoring in a deck chair with his bare feet and thick, tanned legs splayed out in front of him. A tall ice water lolled loosely in his sun-browned hand. He was wearing unevenly torn jean shorts. A borrowed, baby blue unicorn t-shirt that would have been tight on a twelve-year-old was struggling to contain his chest while completely failing to contain his shoulders. No one on the boat would have minded if Dan had gone shirtless—they were in the tropics after all—but Dan's insecurities were much older than his current physique. Being shirtless made him cross his arms and contract in on himself with the shyness of a threatened anemone. Which meant Dan happily wore whatever Lemon Chauncey, his eccentric hostess, loaned him. Today, that meant baby blue and a once regal but now peeling unicorn built like a draft horse, along with the Latin moto, *credo in credendo*. Which, he'd been told, meant "I believe in believing," the old family motto of the Chaunceys.

Dan's breathing stopped. His eyes fluttered. His already slack mouth drooped even further open. Dan was not alone. Sitting cross-legged on the deck chair next to him, a dark-skinned girl leaned toward Dan, studying his face. She was called Pythia, and her hair often surrounded her like a mass of living rope, a protective nest. Now, while she studied Dan, it rippled behind her, binding itself obediently in a bundle at her back. Pythia cupped her small hands and then opened them, releasing a dry leaf into the air above Dan. WAKE was written on the leaf in fire, and after a moment in the air, the leaf was gone, leaving nothing behind but smoke and drifting ash.

Dan snorted, jolted in his deck chair, and spilled ice water down his belly and across his thighs.

Pythia shook with silent laughter.

"Aaa!" Dan moaned, now fully awake. "Why?" He slapped at the ice on his lap and looked at Pythia. She was grinning, still cross-legged, rocking with amusement on her deck chair. "Why do you do this? Don't put me to sleep with a drink in my hand! And definitely don't startle me awake."

Pythia floated another burning leaf into the air.

DANGER.

"Danger? What danger?" Dan looked around the ship deck turned overgrown garden. The lawns were empty. The palm groves swayed quietly. His mother was likely in the kitchen below decks. Despite the stuffy heat, it was her favorite room on the boat. Lemon was nowhere to be seen, and her orangutans were out of sight, too, likely dozing in the shade somewhere, as the smelly orange carpets always seemed to do when the sun was high.

Smoke singed Dan's nostrils as a fresh leaf drifted toward his face.

DREAM.

Dan puffed the burning leaf away, brushed the ash off his damp shirt, and tried to focus on where his dozing mind had been just moments ago. What had he seen?

Not Cyrus. No matter how hard he had tried, he had not dreamt his little brother in weeks. But he'd see Antigone soon. She showed up in his dreams every couple days, although she didn't always give him a clear update.

Dan sighed and looked up at the bright sky. A single frigate bird was spiraling down toward the boat. Seagulls were sputtering disruption somewhere.

Since beginning his practice with Pythia, recalling a dream was never this hard. But there was something very different about this one—protections against prying eyes, protections against prying minds. He didn't know which. He was still fairly new to the business of being a seer. Whichever was going on, it made his skull feel like a sledge-hammered bell, pulsing and humming with increasingly painful echoes of his effort.

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Daniel Smith shut his eyes against the building pain. Elsewhere, he opened them.

Pythia watched Dan's sleeping face relax into his vision. She watched the flutter of veins at his temples. She had another leaf ready if his pulse quickened too much. If he remained stable, she would dream with him. Carefully, she took the half empty glass of water out of his hand and set it on the deck between them.

Someone was watching her. Or something. She could feel it. Looking up, she saw the frigate bird, perched on top of a palm tree on the deck. She stared directly into the bird's eyes, and she felt something unexpected. She felt recognition. The bird, or someone inhabiting the bird, knew who she was.

And now they knew *where* she was.

Dan swirled with the smoke against a timbered ceiling, high above a stage at the end of a large hall. The hall was crowded with transmortals, hundreds of them, all seated at long torch lit tables set with a feast. The stage held three thrones, the outer two occupied, the central throne empty. In front of the empty throne, a large red dragon wrapped its smoking tail around its neck and became a tall, bare-chested man with the olive-skinned physique of a Greek god. Broken chains dangled from his wrists. The dragon, now a large, blood-red blister, rippled beneath the skin on the man's chest.

"Azazel greets you!" the man boomed. Every transmortal drummed fists on the tables. "Gilgamesh of Uruk greets you!" He turned and gestured to the hairy man in white pants seated in one of the three thrones. The hall echoed with the drumming of fists. "The boy, Phoenix, greets you!"

Dan recognized Oliver Laughlin seated in the second throne, still the thin boy Cyrus and Antigone had befriended at Ashtown, and just as pale. With a flourish of his small hand, Oliver half bowed in his seat. Fists pounded in response, but with less enthusiasm.

With arms outstretched and broken chains clattering behind him, the godlike man moved to the edge of the stage.

"I, Radu Bey, master of the dragon gin, devourer of nations, slayer of the father of Smiths, last Dracul, lord of the Ordo Draconis, welcome you to the feast without end!"

The hall exploded with drumming, with shouts and cheers and shattering glass, with voices louder than trumpeting elephants, and still, Radu Bey's voice rose above it all, swallowing the noise like a waterfall.

"Every stone of the Order of Brendan shall be ground to dust! Every transmortal shall be loosed among mankind to feast as they like. The line of Smith shall be doused like a candle against the tongue. Together, with our new ally," he gestured to Oliver, "we shall usher in a new age, an older age, a world for the strong and only the strong."

Phoenix wasn't at all comfortable in the hall with the transmortals, but it was a necessary risk. Oliver's teenage body was not up to a fight with anyone in the room, but he did have more than two dozen of his modified Reborn sons hidden outside within easy reach of his mind. They were all armed with dart guns strong enough to tranquilize the largest of the transmortals, and if the feast became dangerous—*when* the feast became dangerous—Phoenix was confident that he could slip away unharmed.

Yawning as Radu Bey preened on the stage in front of the raucous crowd, Phoenix turned to look at Gilgamesh in the other throne, the representative of the most ancient ones in the Ordo. A powerful contingent, but a minority in the hall. Gil stared back at Phoenix with his giant eyes in his giant face, and then he raised a giant six-fingered hand to scratch at his beard, high on his cheekbone.

"They might trust you," Oliver said. Even possessed by Phoenix, his voice was still young. "But I don't. That spider girl has had you tangled in her webs for centuries. You can't stay away from Arachne."

"She will come," Gil said. "When the Smiths are dead and Ashtown is dust. Arachne will come."

"If she does, she'll be killed," Oliver said. "Radu will never allow her back."

"She is an ancient one," Gil said. "She shall have my protection."

"Will she want it?" Oliver asked. "How many times have you betrayed her?"

Gil flushed and Oliver laughed. The huge hero was much too easy to fluster. They all were. Which is how Phoenix knew they could all be tamed or caged… passions could be led into traps. After all, Brendan and his Order had buried most of them once. It could be done again. The only thing that really mattered was that Phoenix recover the Dragon's Tooth before the transmortals could.

Radu Bey turned and gestured to Oliver, forcing him to start listening again.

"Yesterday, the Smith called Cyrus was captured. Even now, dragons travel to collect him. When we've finished with his body, he shall be yours to play with according to our agreement." Radu Bey turned back to his adoring audience. "The Burials of Ashtown are undefended. We feast. And tomorrow, we finish what was begun."

Oliver sat up in his seat, shifting uncomfortably. Gil grinned at him.

"Without the tooth," Gil said, "how long do you expect to survive among us?"

"Leon!" Antigone was lying on her stomach at the end of the stone jetty. She cupped her hands and shouted straight down at the dark lake water. The moon had set, and the waves had gone, leaving the water flat but breeze rippled.

"Cheese, Leon! Eat your cheese!"

Babd Catha's skull had been quite dry and had broken into chunks easily under a barrage of hammer blows. Those chunks had become sandy powder in Sterling's flour mill while the black scalp feathers burned on Fire Island. Even with a breeze blowing and the wall missing, the smell in the kitchen had made Antigone's stomach turn.

Sterling had added water to the bone powder and helped Antigone pack it into a ball. Then he'd melted her a sheet of cheese to wrap it in. Now, a fat cheese and bone dumpling the size of a bowling ball sat on the stone jetty beside her.

Someone had told Jax what she was planning, and the small zookeeper had insisted on coming along. She could hear his wheelchair squeaking behind her.

"He won't come," Jax said. "I'm here. I made him fight the dragons. Leon won't forgive me. I should leave."

"Stop it," Antigone said. "You did what Rupert asked and what had to be done. I'm sure that Leon likes you more than any other human being he's ever met." Antigone looked back at the skinny kid, now even skinnier. Like Diana Boone's, his cheeks were far more sunken than they had been four weeks ago. His hair, never tidy, was a damp curly mess across his forehead, and heavy plaid blankets were mounded on his legs. Clearly, he was still feverish.

"You should call him," Antigone said. "Try. He still likes you, I promise."

James Axelrotter pressed down on the arms of his chair and shifted his weight back, trying to sit up straighter.

"Really?" he asked.

"Really," Antigone said.

"Leon!" Jax erupted. He had been more ready than Antigone had realized.

The boy cupped his hands. "Cheese, Leon!"

Water licked the jetty. Distant crickets chirped along the shore. Boats rocked and bumped. Bats fluttered in front of the stars.

The surface of the lake bubbled. Antigone jumped to her feet as the bubbles grew, followed by the crown of a spiny dome that looked part antique car, part dinosaur.

Finally, Leon's enormous head broke the surface, spouting water out of his asymmetrical nostrils.

"Leon!" Jax couldn't hold back his laughter. "You came!"

The giant turtle's long alligator tail twisted in the water, easing him toward the jetty. He gaped his massive mouth as he approached. Antigone couldn't see it, but she knew Leon would be wriggling a large

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wormy bit of flesh in the back of his throat to attract prey.

This prey needed no attraction. Grabbing the Babd Catha dumpling, Antigone dropped to her knees and leaned forward.

"Careful," Jax said. "He's hungry."

Antigone couldn't afford to be careful. She couldn't afford to miss. Not right now.

Even when she could smell Leon's breath, she waited. When she could feel it puffing on her face, she leaned further forward. When she saw the giant earthworm piece of flesh dancing in the back of Leon's throat, she heaved her skull dumpling.

Leon's jaws snapped shut louder than a rifle. Antigone fell over backward. Lake water rained down around her.

The turtle sank. Black waves slapped together where he had just been, and the quiet sounds of night beside a lake returned.

"Oh, Leon," Jax said. "I wish you could stay."

Cyrus woke, upright and seated, but he couldn't see. The wound from Babd Catha's talons was burning in his neck and he badly wanted to scratch it. Rain drummed all around him, but he couldn't feel any moisture. Cyrus wasn't blindfolded. His eyelids were sealed tight with something sticky. He tried to reach for them, but his wrists jerked against rope. He'd been tied to a chair, but loosely. More loosely than his eyelids.

"Welcome, Mr. Smith," a man said. His accent was British, and his tone polite. "And good morning."

Cyrus tried to lean his face down toward his hands, but another rope stopped him, this one looped around his chest beneath his arms. "I can't see," Cyrus said. "Who are you? What's going on?"

"Do try to hold still," the man said. "We find that the deprivation of sight enables us to minimize restraints. But other less comfortable options are available."

"I want to see," Cyrus said.

"No," the man answered. "You do not. I assure you."

A delicate touch tickled Cyrus's left arm, followed by another. And then several others. Something was crawling up his arm. Something with multiple sharp legs that weighed as much as a tennis ball. The creature crossed Cyrus's sleeve and crawled onto his chest. Cyrus held his breath, waiting, wondering. It wasn't a lizard. A scorpion? Whatever it was touched the side of his neck, avoiding his wound and stroking his skin like someone drawing on him with a feather quill. Patricia adjusted herself on Cyrus's throat, and the keyring she was holding dragged against his Adam's apple. But Patricia wasn't growing. Whatever was touching Cyrus's neck, Patricia didn't think it was a threat. If she did, she would have already struck it.

"Interesting," the man said.

"No!" said Cyrus. "Not interesting! What is going on? What is on me?"

"Soon," the man said, "you will feel a bite. It will not be lethal, but it will burn, if only briefly. And then, when the burning has passed, we will open your eyes and you will be unable to tell us anything but the truth. We would like to hear the truth before the dragons take you. They are coming, you know. Quite eager, the Ordo Draconis. No doubt they'll invite me to join. They'll have to. I now possess what Radu Bey wants more than anything else in the world—the young, insufferable Smith."

The delicate tracing hadn't stopped on Cyrus's neck, and he realized that he'd been holding his breath, waiting for a painful bite. None had come.

"Who are you?" Cyrus asked. The man must be some kind of transmortal. He'd have to be to join Radu Bey. Cyrus heard a chair scrape and footsteps retreat. Two voices, both male, spoke quietly.

"Why won't it bite?" the British voice asked. "Do we have another?"

"I do not," the second voice said. "What dragons come? They must not stay. You must not stay."

"Is it a spider?" Cyrus asked. "It's a spider, isn't it? And it's supposed to make me tell the truth? I'll tell you the truth without being bitten. I promise. What do you want to know?"

The voices grew lower, barely more than hissing. The spider on Cyrus's neck, if that's what it was, climbed over Patricia and then up over Cyrus's jaw onto his cheek. Cyrus writhed and puffed air at the tickling, but the creature didn't seem to mind his breath.

"Seriously!" Cyrus yelled. "What do you want to know?"

A single sharp foot prodded Cyrus's eyelid. He froze. Two feet now. Both pulling. The stickiness began to peel away, stretching his eyelid with it, uprooting eyelashes. A moment later, Cyrus's left eyelids were pried apart by eight needle sharp feet. Light poured in. Too much light, and Cyrus couldn't blink because a mouse-sized spider with a hairy black and blue belly was straddling his eyeball, holding his eyelids open. Tears streamed down Cyrus's cheek. A scream leapt up inside him, but he caught it with a gurgle in his throat just in time. The spider was clearly a friend. Why, he did not know, but why didn't matter right now. The spider scrambled over Cyrus's nose to work on his other eye, leaving Cyrus with his first clear view of his surroundings.

He was in an open-sided shelter built with a plank floor and four thick and twisted poles in the corners. Solid sheets of rain streamed off the palm frond roof on every side. Two men stood just out of the rain, both with their backs to Cyrus. One was pale, with hair the color of cigarette ash, dressed in western clothes—high boots, cargo pocketed trousers, safari shirt. The other had darker skin than Cyrus did, although not by much. He wore cutoff shorts with a wide bone and rope belt, no shoes, and no shirt. His short black hair was unevenly cropped and standing out in every direction, and he wore a long black sword on his bare back. Cyrus had seen swords exactly like it in Ashtown—some real, some fake. The real ones had been forged with the Dragon's Tooth and, when near it, they struck with the same power. The fake ones were just black and had been used in rituals by the Brendanite monks at Ashtown for so long that not many had known the difference.

A small table in front of Cyrus held dried meat, nuts, and fruit, along with the broken bamboo cane that Phoenix had made to hold the Dragon's Tooth. At the top, the hinged silver knob was closed, hiding the tooth from view. The men might not even know it was there. Yet.

The spider finished tugging Cyrus's right eye open and then dragged its fat abdomen up onto the middle of Cyrus's forehead. There, after turning in two circles like an eight-legged dog getting comfortable, it sat, and it stayed.

The fully clothed man glanced back at Cyrus, and his voice rose back to normal. Whatever secrets the men had been exchanging, they had finished.

"We don't need her," he said. "She has no value of any kind. Feed her to the nymphs."

"Ow!" Cyrus yelled. He hoped the spider wouldn't mind being framed for a bite it didn't commit. "Ow!" he yelled again, shutting his eyes, but not all the way. He had just enough visibility through his curtained eyelashes to see both men turn and face him. His abilities with partial eye closure had always worked on his parents at bedtime when he was young. It had worked on Antigone and Dan when they'd lived in the Archer Motel. It had worked in the jungle when Mercy was trying to talk to him. He was confident it would work now. The key was not to look at their faces. Benefit of long eyelashes—he could let them blockade all eye contact. Focus on feet and legs and torsos. If you can see their eyes, they can see yours. If you can't, they can't. Even subconsciously, everyone can feel eye contact.

"It burns!" Cyrus said. "You didn't have to let it bite me. I would have told you the truth anyway. See, that's the truth! It has to be, right? I can't lie, right?"

Cyrus watched two sets of legs approach and stop on either side of the table that held the tooth. Four hands hung within view. One of them—the right hand on the pale man—was the hand of a skeleton, completely without flesh almost up to his elbow. Cyrus tried not to react. Definitely a transmortal of some kind. The bone hand reached forward and plucked the spider off Cyrus's forehead.

"Do you have ice?" Cyrus asked. "I need ice." He still had a bite to fake and a role to play. He leaned his head forward. The fictional bite should be in his thick hair, where it would be harder to see. "On my

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scalp, like an inch back from my forehead. Maybe two. Please. Ice. It's burning. And scratch my neck. My neck itches bad. It's where Babd Catha clawed me before I cut her head off. I itch it a lot, but not as much as the arch of my right foot. Have you ever scratched something till you bled? I have."

"Hush," the British man said.

Cyrus hushed. Had that been enough? How much did people usually blather when bitten by a truth spider? He sniffed. He waited. And then he began to rock in his chair and roll his head like he was in pain.

"State your full name," the man said.

"Cyrus Lawrence Smith," Cyrus said. "Polygoner. Journeyman to Rupert Greeves, Avengel. I am called the Desolation. Even the dragons know me. They fear me. I kill them. Maxi was first. Babd. A fishy lady with scale tattoos. Others? I don't know. Probably at Ashtown. I chopped lots and lots. Lawrence is for my father. Smith came down from the Captain. Don't know why Cyrus. Don't know. Cyrus Lawrence Smith. *Sic semper draconis.* That's my full name. Call me that. That's all of it."

"Sic semper draconis." The man repeated the words like each one was more disgusting than the last. Cyrus could hear his sneer without seeing it. "The Captain always was such a child. We shan't be missing him or his clumsy Latin."

"Too many words," the shirtless man said. "Let the venom thin."

Helpful, Cyrus thought. Nice to get some direction. He could dial his performance back a touch.

"What is Rupert Greeves planning?" the pale man asked. "What are Ashtown's defenses?"

Well, Cyrus thought. Time to place his bet. He really hoped no one had opened the knob on the end of his broken bit of bamboo.

"Rupert Greeves holds the Dragon's Tooth," Cyrus said. "He has collected the oldest of Brendan's weapons. The Brothers Below breathe again, Justice and Wrath defend the halls of Ashtown. The Avengel will kill Phoenix. He will kill Radu Bey. He will execute every transmortal in every Burial. He will end this war forever."

The bone hand clamped Cyrus's shoulder, just below the wound on his neck. Fingers began to dig in.

"Liar," the man said. His hot breath smelled of rot. "What game are you trying to play?"

Fleshy fingers opened Cyrus's eyelids, and he was staring into two golden eyes with muddy pupils shaped like crosses. The skin on the undead transmortal's face was dry and flaking off in scales.

"I've been told Rupert Greeves is dead."

"You've been told wrong," Cyrus said.

The bone fingers moved to Cyrus's throat, squeezing tight, collapsing his airway. Compressing Patricia.

While Cyrus struggled to breathe, silver light flashed beneath his face. His keyring fell off the snake and onto his lap. Patricia was angry.

The little silver snake with emerald eyes exploded in size as she struck the transmortal like lightning, latching onto his face with wide open jaws, looping a fat coil around the man's neck and flipping Cyrus and his chair into a backward somersault with the tip of her tail.

The pale transmortal was screaming. The bare-chested man was yelling.

The chair had splintered in the somersault. Cyrus hadn't.

Cyrus jumped to his feet with pieces of the chair tied to his limbs and back like armor. Patricia's now Anaconda-sized body was wrapped entirely around the transmortal's neck and head. Her glow filled the shelter with silver light. The bare-chested man had drawn his black sword and was looking for a chance to strike the snake. Other men like him were sprinting through the rain toward the shelter.

Cyrus smiled. He loved that snake. She was immortal. Beyond harm, no matter how many warriors came running. Unless…

His eyes jumped from the bamboo cane and its silver knob to the black-bladed sword now raised high. In the presence of the tooth, that sword might strike with the full power of the Reaper's Blade. The immortal could be slain, and that might include Patricia.

Cyrus lunged forward, grabbing the warrior's wrist from behind. The man was much stronger than Cyrus, but Rupert and Nolan and Jeb and the Captain had all worked hard to train Cyrus's instincts for moments like this. With a twist and a spin and a swipe of the legs, the startled, bare-chested warrior was flat on his back and empty handed.

"Stop!" Cyrus yelled, black blade held high. A dozen warriors slowed and stopped in the pouring rain outside the shelter. Mud swallowed their feet.

"I am Cyrus Smith, son of Catie and Lawrence Smith. If you are the Cataan, then we are family. I'm half from California and half from… you." The transmortal grunted and groaned under Patricia's weight. No one else spoke. Cyrus looked down at the warrior at his feet. He was more boy than man, a teenager not much older than Dan at the most.

"Do you speak English?" Cyrus asked.

"Of course we do," the warrior sneered. "How else would we communicate with invaders?"

"Who is this?" Cyrus asked, pointing at the kicking feet beneath Patricia's knotted body.

"One who cannot die," the warrior answered. "Calls himself a priest. A servant of the sea beast. Your mother," he sat up, "I do not remember her. I was young when she left for the white world. But I know the stories. She would have led us. Instead, this man and his beast have ruled for many years."

Cyrus focused on Patricia. He'd seen Brother Niffy retrieve his golden patrik by pinching the tip of its tail. With the black sword in his right hand, he pinched her tail with his left and watched in surprise as the snake began to release her victim and shrink.

"Are you one who cannot die?" the warrior asked. "The serpent is charmed."

"Yes. She is. And yes, I die," Cyrus said. "No," he added, glancing at the Dragon's Tooth on the table. "Nevermind. I mean, I'll die some time. Just not right now."

"Your wound is gone." The man rose all the way to his feet. "The rot and darkness on your neck."

Cyrus couldn't see his own neck. And his hands were too busy to check. But the itch was gone along with the burning. Probably from the adrenaline.

Patricia was still long, but she had grown thin enough to find the keyring on the floor and slither through it before ascending back up Cyrus's leg.

The transmortal was seated on the floor, breathing hard and leaning against a post, clenching and unclenching his skeletal hand. He looked up with a snarl.

"The dragons are coming," he said. "We cannot be killed. We will devour you all. And the ones they leave behind, I will feed to the beast. We have killed and consumed more mortals than you can imagine."

"Congrats," Cyrus said. "You guys are the worst." Cyrus said.

"I was in the O of B," the man said. "In another life, when it still had potential. I was with Edwin Laughlin for his first experiments, before he became Phoenix. I collected his victims, and I hid their remains in the walls of Ashtown. We killed so many Smiths. Too many to remember. More than have ever been found." He flared his nostrils, his lip quivering as he spoke. "You all smell the same."

"What is your name?" Cyrus asked.

"When the dragons arrive, I will consider it my duty to suck the marrow from your bones," the man said. "You and that little girl—"

"Name," Cyrus said. "For the Order of Brendan's records."

"Oh, well," the man sneered. "For the records then. Willem Radulf Baldwin. Born the 14th of April, 1959. Transmortaled on the 8th of August, 1988."

"Died by execution," Cyrus said, stepping forward, "whenever today is."

The man began to laugh and held up his skeleton hand. "I am beyond death! How do you expect to kill me?"

"Quickly," Cyrus said. *"Sic semper draconis."*

"Idiot. You know that's incorrect. The dative—"

The black blade whipped around even faster than Cyrus was expecting, burying itself deep in the post behind the man.

Two halves of Willem Radulf Baldwin collapsed to the plank floor. Bone fingers scattered like dice.

END OF CHAPTER 2

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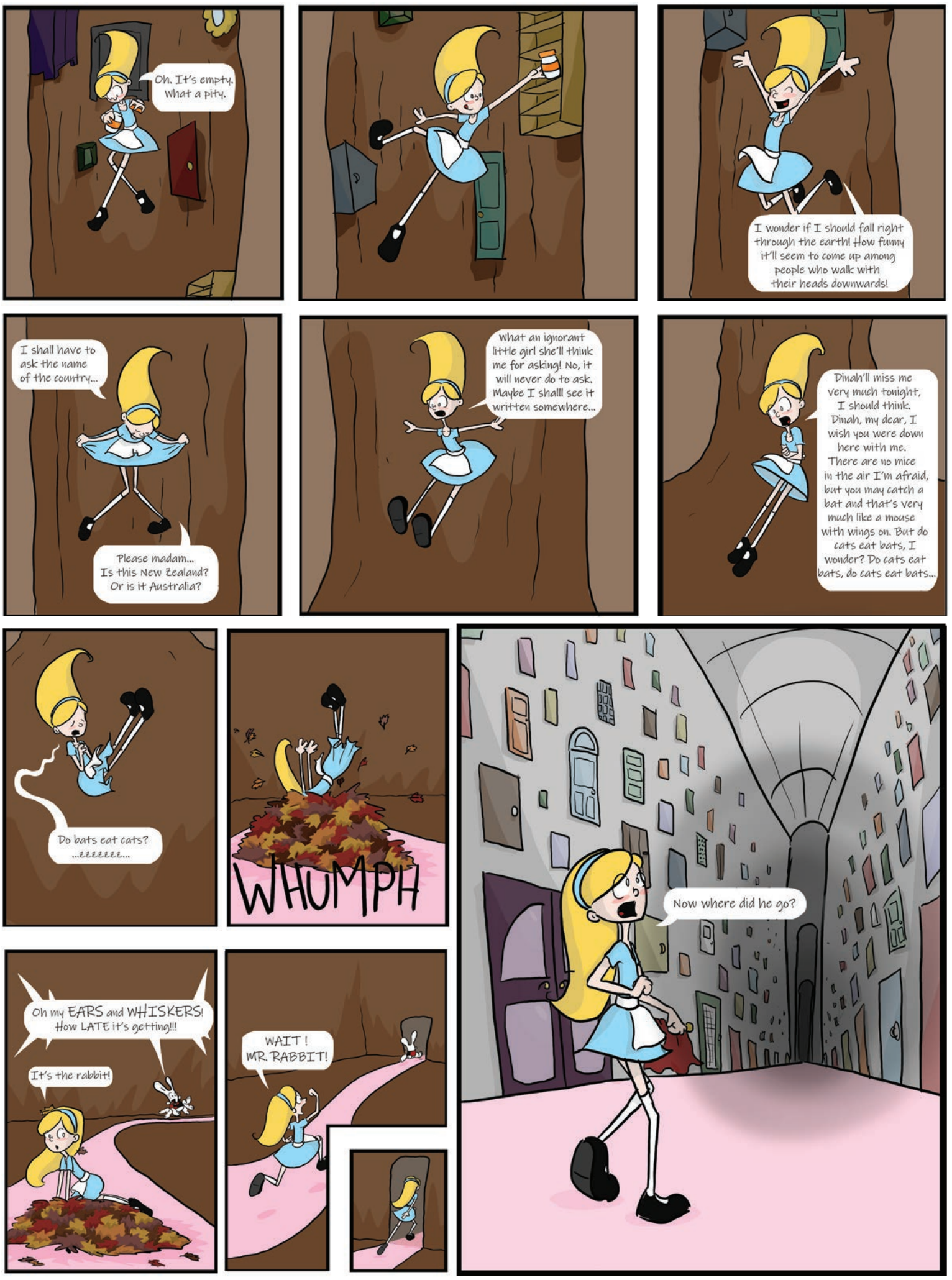
THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN


Oh. It's empty. What a pity.
I wonder if I should fall right through the earth! How funny it'll seem to come up among people who walk with their heads downwards!
I shall have to ask the name of the country...
Please madam... Is this New Zealand? Or is it Australia?
What an ignorant little girl she'll think me for asking! No, it will never do to ask. Maybe I shalll see it written somewhere...
Dinah'll miss me very much tonight, I should think. Dinah, my dear, I wish you were down here with me. There are no mice in the air I'm afraid, but you may catch a bat and that's very much like a mouse with wings on. But do cats eat bats, I wonder? Do cats eat bats, do cats eat bats...
Do bats eat cats? ...zzzzzzz...
WHUMPH
Now where did he go?
Oh my EARS and WHISKERS! How LATE it's getting!!!
It's the rabbit!
WAIT ! MR. RABBIT!

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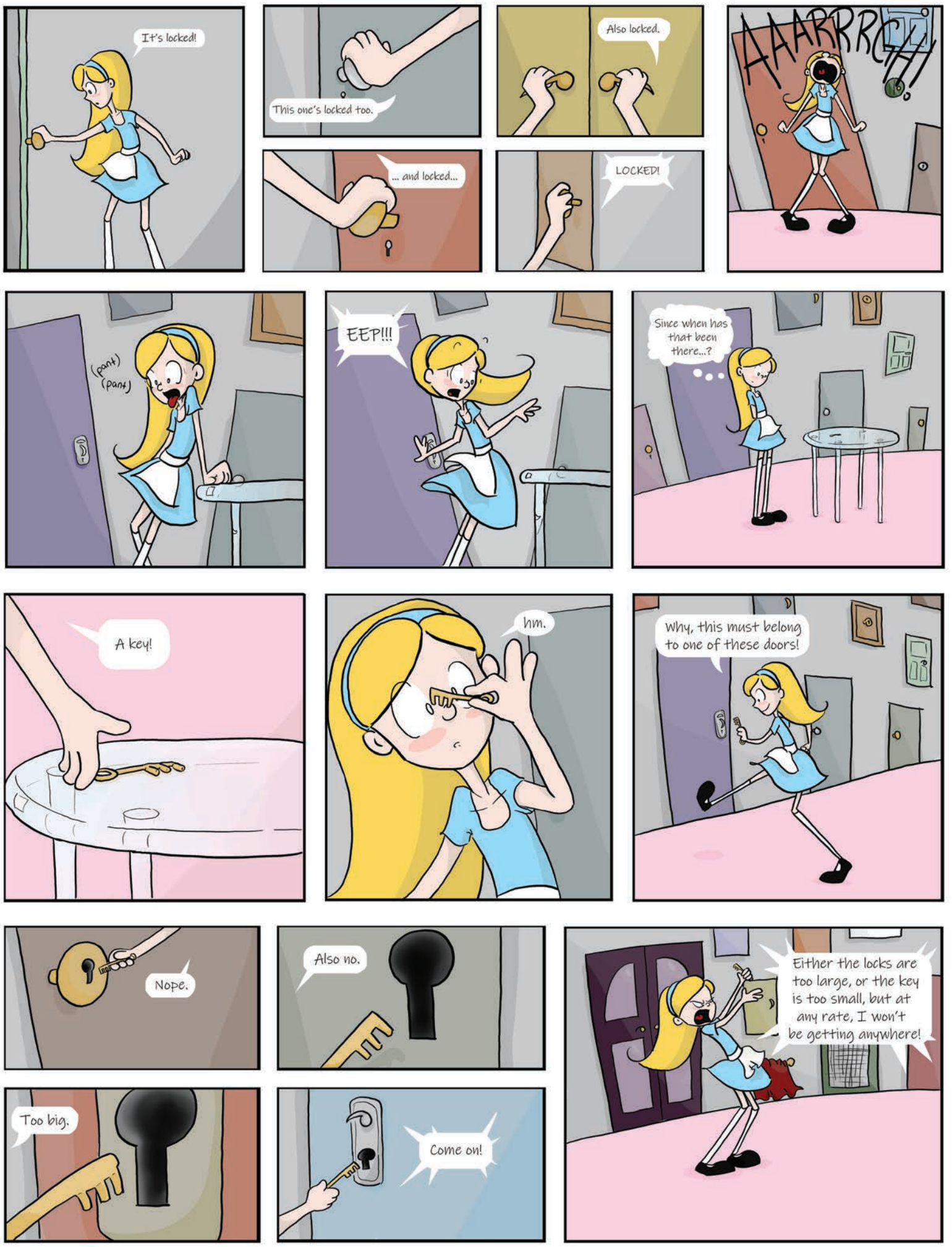

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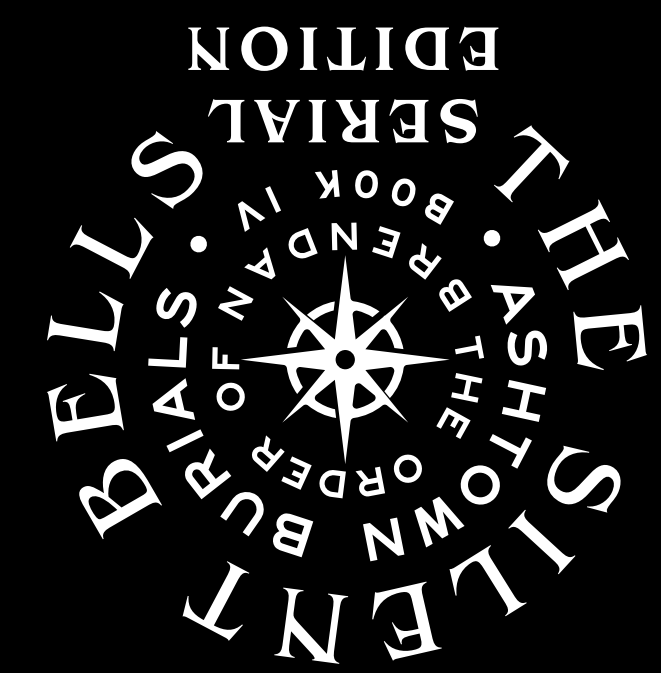

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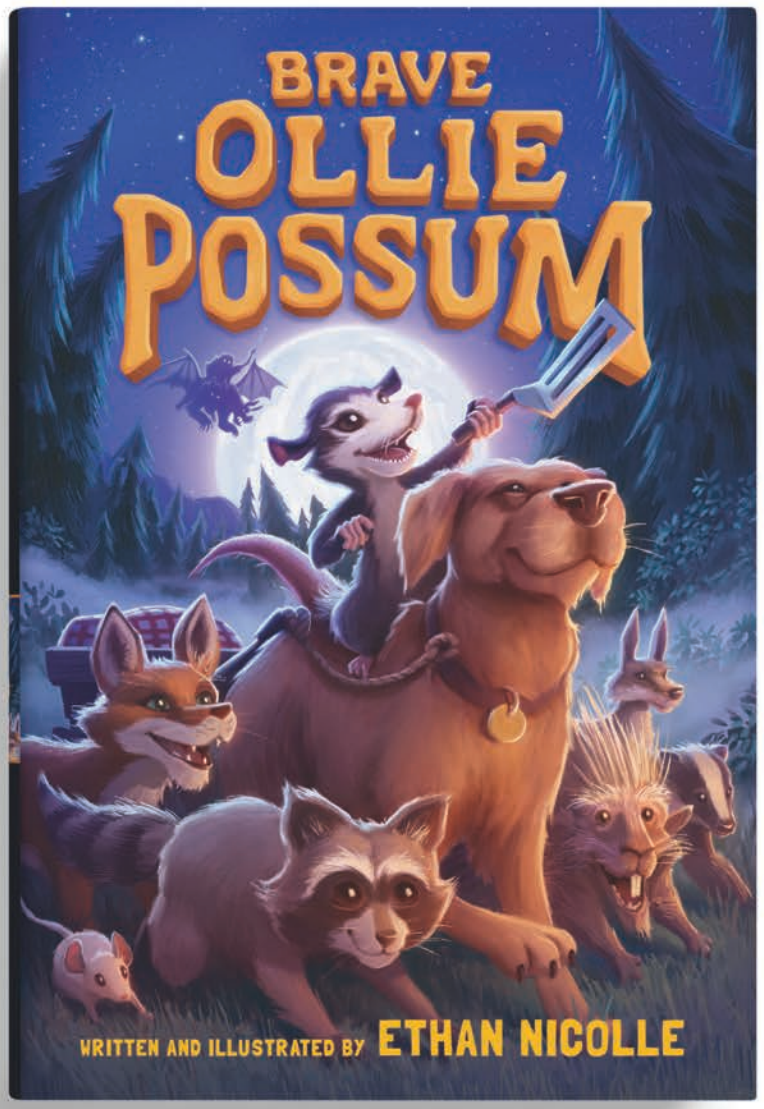

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The Silent Bells

CHAPTER THREE

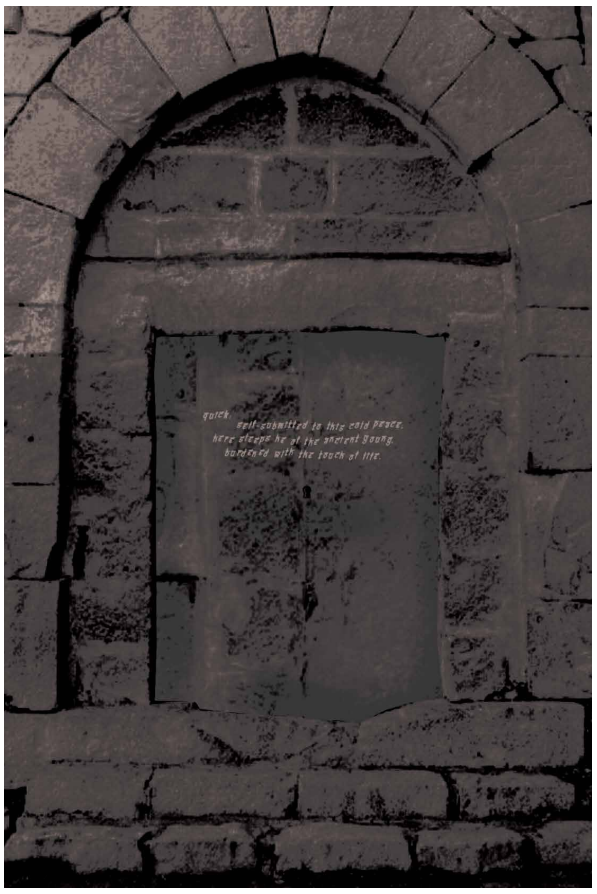
N.D. WILSON

OLD CLAY

The Burial tunnels beneath Ashtown were as tangled as a willow tree's roots, but Antigone Smith had known exactly where she was going. The rest of the remnant of Ashtown were all above ground, asleep, or packing to evacuate in the morning. Antigone sat cross-legged and alone on the stone floor of one of the deepest and oldest of the Burial tunnels with a tired lantern between her knees. The stone door in the wall in front of her was gray but filled with smoky green veins that moved slowly whenever she wasn't looking at them. At the center of the door, there was a single silver chain link around a silver keyhole. Above the link was an inscription that had morphed from some chicken scratch language into English when she had first touched the stone.

quick: self-submitted to this cold peace, here sleeps he of the ancient young, burdened with the touch of life.

There may have been a more unpleasant place to be alone in Ashtown, but Antigone didn't know of one. Three weeks ago—and for centuries before—this tunnel had held doors to seven ancient Burials. Now, parts of the floor, one wall, and the ceiling were missing from Radu Bey's explosive invasion through Babd Catha's Burial. Antigone had no idea if the other Burials were still secure. Her lantern only spilled light a few feet in each direction, and as deep and dark and damp and still as the tunnels were, they were not silent.



Human eyes adjust and expand to see more and more in prolonged darkness—some things real, and some imagined. Human ears are the same. Behind every thick door Antigone had passed to get to this place, behind the thick stone walls of the tunnels, through the gaping black holes where walls, ceiling, and floor had collapsed, there were ancient beings just as alive as they had been for centuries, as alive as they had been when they were first imprisoned by Brendan and his disciples with locks and charms and thick stone, back when the New World was just a fairy tale to Europeans and Ashtown, on the banks of an enormous and unknown freshwater sea, had been the very furthest reaches of the earth to their imaginations.

After an hour alone in the tunnel, the beating of Antigone's heart had grown as loud as thunder. Dripping water in the darkness may as well have been clattering steel. And the living things behind the doors, behind the walls, became audible, spilling the nightmarish whispers of nightmarish creatures into the tunnel, tightening the skin up and down Antigone's cold spine with every ghostly sound that slipped into her ears.

A scrape. A scream muffled by stone. A cough? Dripping water in the shattered hole where Babd Catha's Burial had been blown open.

Tapping.

Tapping.

Tapping.

It came from above Antigone. Behind her. In the floor. Far to her left. Off to her right. Messages and replies, whole conversations were being carried on between the Burials with tapping. The constant reminder that Antigone was seated in a prison, surrounded by unquenchable lives.

Antigone shut her eyes and leaned forward above her lamp, letting her forehead rest on the soft stone of the door in front of her. The surface receded slightly, shaping itself to the curve of her skull. This was the only door to any of the Burials that was soft—like slow-moving mud. And it was the only door that was warm to her touch. But even stranger than those two things, the Burial held Quick, a voluntary occupant, the son of Babd Catha, who had chosen Burial for himself. Antigone did not know the story, nor did she expect to be told. She hadn't enjoyed her last conversation with the bald, freckly, undying boy, but she was back for more. All that mattered to her now was that the shape-shifting boy who occupied the Burial possessed the touch of life. He was why the stone was soft and fluid, and he was the one who had crafted the enormous living statues, the Brothers Below, for Brendan centuries ago. Antigone herself had seen stone flowers and grass sprout from Quick's Burial floor when she and Cyrus had been looking for those brothers to help them against Radu Bey.

If anyone could tell Antigone how to revive Rupert Greeves, it would the boy behind the soft, living stone. Which was why, after more than an hour, she was still sitting alone in one of her least favorite places in the entire world.

"Quick!" she yelled without opening her eyes. Her voice trailed off with exhaustion. "Please. I know you can hear me."

Antigone raised her right hand and slapped her already bruised palm against the door. It hurt just as much as any other stone would have.

"I need your help. I don't have the key we used to unlock your door last time! My brother disappeared with it! Just let me in. Or come out. I know you can!"

Echoes of her voice died down the tunnel in both directions. Silence. Dripping water. And then, once again, tapping. How many transmortals were listening to her? How many of the smug, undying demons were waiting to hear Quick's decision? Was all the tapping about her, or were the undying always this chatty?

Antigone knew transmortal ears were hidden above and below and on all sides. Which is why she hadn't been too specific with her information. Yet. She didn't want the Buried knowing how dire the situation was

above ground. But why did it matter now? Who really cared?

Fine.

"Cyrus killed your mom!" Antigone yelled. "Babd Catha is dead! But she wounded the Avengel first. He survived for a while, but the wound got weird and nasty, and he just died. After weeks." She placed both palms on the warm door and leaned her mouth right up against the stone. "But I need him back! He can't be dead yet! I burned Babd's feathers, and I smashed her skull up into meal and wrapped it in cheese and fed it to a giant turtle. And then the wound changed. It's better. That means he can't be all the way dead yet, right? Corpses don't heal, right? Not even in Ashtown. Although, it didn't really heal. It just stopped being rotten in the way it was before. And a guy named Wiglaf said that Rupert needs the touch of life, and that's what you have, and I know you're on the right side. You're not evil like your mom was. So please, just tell me what to do to get him back!"

Echoes. Dripping. And then silence until, slowly at first, the tapping returned.

Antigone sighed and pushed herself up off the stone floor. "We're leaving in the morning, by the way!" she yelled. "Ashtown is over. Ruined. Maybe forever. The transmortals are coming, and they're going to try and open all the Burials, I'm sure. Even yours."

Antigone picked up her lantern and slapped the stone door one more time. "So, you know… have fun with that!"

The stone sent ripples out to the edges of the door like rings around a splash. The temperature in the tunnel rose as the smoky green veins whipped in the door. And then, with a sucking sound like the world's largest boot being pulled from the world's thickest mud, the soft stone parted, and white daylight flooded the tunnel around the small silhouette of a shirtless boy.

Antigone turned away, squinting, with one arm thrown up against the light.

"Has a new Avengel been sworn?" the boy asked. His voice was gentle, but it rode through the tunnel and around Antigone's face like a cool breeze. "Only the Avengel can release me from my vow. My feet will not cross this threshold without his word."

"No," Antigone said, squinting under her arm. "But all the treaties have been dissolved. There is no Brendan, and there is no new Avengel. But the last one was my Keeper. And my brother's. So… there's that. And he's the one who needs your help."

Quick stood, statue still in the doorway, backlit with sunlight. Antigone could see trees swaying in the distance behind him. Whether those trees were really there, whether the Burial really held that much space at all, whether or not the sunlight was entirely imaginary were all things beyond her knowledge. And, at that moment, beyond her caring.

"Please," Antigone said. "If anyone can help him, you can."

Quick didn't move. He didn't speak. Antigone eased forward close enough to see that the boy was still wearing rawhide trousers, that he still had no hair, and that his caramel skin was still speckled with constellations of chocolate freckles. But, as she had seen him shift into a lamb before, she knew that this might not be his real form at all.

"I release you," she said. "You are released from your vow to Brendan. More than that, Brendan requests that you tend to his Avengel. Please."

"Brendan is dead, his body dust and ash," Quick said. "You think to speak for him?"

"Yeah," Antigone said. "I do."

"By what authority?" Quick asked. "You are a girl. A lowling in your order. How can you say this?"

"Because there is no one else who will," Antigone said. "Because, for some reason, in all the universe, I've ended up right here, right now. And I guess that means I'm the one who is supposed to do it. Rupert always said stuff like that. Brendan is elsewhere and has been for some time, so saddle up your war pony and get it done. And Brendan's not the only one who is gone. The grownups have all died or fled or given up and gone to bed. Which is why, after centuries in the ground, you have now been released from your vow and from your Burial by Antigone Elizabeth Smith, on behalf of all of Brendan's children, faithful and unfaithful, in all the world." Antigone bit her lip, realizing that she had been rambling. She hoped it had sounded official enough to be convincing, but the boy still wasn't responding.

Antigone sniffed and cleared her throat. "Officially and without appeal," she added. "And now, I really need you to come out of there and help me."

Dripping.

Tapping.

Wind from inside the bright Burial stirred dust on the tunnel floor around Antigone's feet.

"You burned the feathers from my mother's skull?" Quick asked.

Antigone nodded. "In a kitchen fire."

Quick sighed. "And ground the bone?"

"Yeah," Antigone said. "And I wrapped in cheese and fed it to an enormous turtle."

"It was all consumed?"

"It was," Antigone said. "I don't know if it stayed down, but Leon swallowed it whole."

"And you are sworn to Brendan and speak with his full authority?"

"As much as anyone can right now," Antigone said. "I guess."

Quick ran both hands over his bald scalp and then braced them on the sides of the door to his Burial. The liquid stone receded further. And then, with one exaggerated stride, he stepped across the threshold and into the tunnel. Behind him, his Burial went pitch black. At the same time, the tunnel erupted with light.

"Take me to your dead Avengel," Quick said. "I will tell you if his soul has journeyed too far beyond the touch of creatures."

"Finally," Antigone said. "Awesome. Thank you. Okay." The boy with the touch of life would come, the one who could even make stone sprout into flowers. Her relief was too heavy, too fast, and too precarious for her to process. Her body felt soft, her legs wobbly. She had been running on desperation for hours, but now she had something else. Was it hope? Maybe. But it was drowning in fear. Until this moment, she had been fighting for what had to be the slimmest of chances. Now, that last chance was in play. And if Quick told her that Rupert was dead and gone, even that last chance would be gone with him. Forever. Antigone could feel her ribs tightening with worry, her breath shortening, her throat closing. Relief hadn't lasted long. Worry and fear remained.

Rupert couldn't stay dead. He couldn't be gone forever. Antigone had refused to accept that possibility. She had raged against it. Now, she had to admit that it was possible. In fact, it was likely. Quick would look at Rupert, and then she would know. The situation would be settled and final. And Antigone didn't like that thought. Dragging a long slow breath in through her tight throat, she then exhaled quickly. She had done what she could to give Rupert a chance. Although, if she was being honest, this wasn't about Rupert. He was fine where he was. This was about all the people Rupert had left behind, the sheep without a shepherd.

This was about her.

Leaning back into Quick's Burial, Antigone lifted her dim lantern

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into the darkness. The space was small, no more than eight feet square. In the center, there was a small pool of dark water the size of a birdbath. In the corner, there was a bed of stone big enough for a toddler. The whole thing had been an illusion. How had she and Cyrus even fit in there with the boy before?

"Come," Quick said. He touched Antigone's arm, and a jolt of ice and fire ripped up into her head, burning her eyes and sinuses. "Your Keeper's soul will be traveling even now."

Antigone hadn't needed her lantern to find the chapel. Auroras of white and green and blue light whipped out of the boy, Quick, every time he moved. The lights, snapping and flashing like horsetails in the wind, whispered against the walls, the floor, the ceiling, stirring dust and spider webs, leading the way and trailing behind.

After Rupert's death, the Livingstones had insisted on placing his body in what Nolan had called Avengel's Alley when he had showed the Smiths the space more than a year ago. O of B officials had referred to it as Borodon's Bosom for centuries, although Antigone doubted that Brendan himself would have named it that. Nolan had assured her that it was Brendan himself who had created the long crypt chapel in the shape of a ship's hold. It had housed the body of Brendan's first Avengel with extensive space reserved for generations of Avengels after.

Antigone grabbed two rough iron rings and pulled the timbered chapel doors open. The chapel itself had been the domain of the Brendanite monks for some time, and the site of their recent destruction. Cold air washed around Antigone where she stood. Statues and paintings were stained with smoke. The altar in the front had been cracked. Dark blood stains still marked the floors. Antigone herself had helped remove and bury many of the bodies, and she could still picture specific shapes on each of the specific stains.

"This is a house of grief," Quick said.

"Yeah." Antigone stepped aside and let the small shirtless boy enter, filling the chapel's space with his whipping light. "It was bad," she added. "Rupe is over here."

Antigone hurried across the stained floor, aiming for a wooden door of black planks, intricately carved with small, medieval figures engaged in various gruesome acts and adventures. Behind that door, she knew there would be shallow stone steps down into a path between rows of stone coffins, caskets, and sarcophagi regimented in a timbered space, like the interior of a vast ship. The longest dead were the closest to the stairs. Rupert and his more recently dead predecessors would be almost fifty yards in, past a small altar in the center of the long low hold.

The carved door was already open a few inches. As Antigone pulled it wide, she saw golden torchlight at the bottom of the steps before it was overwhelmed by Quick's flashing auroras. Someone else was down there. Someone alive.

"Whatcha!" an Irish voice echoed up out of the crypt. "Who's there? If ye're yearning for desecration, I'll skin your mothers!"

"Niffy!" Antigone quick stepped down the stairs. "Hey! It's me."

Stone arches carved like ship's timbers marched away above hundreds of granite and marble caskets, some lidded with statues of the dead, some unmarked, some inscribed with names and long Latin epitaphs. Far away, Antigone saw the shape of Brother Boniface Brosnan rise from his knees and sit on a white marble box. Just across from him, a casket of much darker stone held the shrouded shape of Rupert Greeves on its lid. The young, thick Irish monk hitched his robe above his tree-trunk calves and scratched at his knees. The golden light Antigone had seen was not from a torch, but from a tiny snake—a golden patrik—coiled around Niffy's significant wrist, throwing stark shadows on the columns and walls.

"Tigs," Niffy said. "I thought you'd come. The man deserves some respect from your lot—who's this then?"

Quick descended the steps and stopped next Antigone. Side by side, she realized how slight he really was. She probably outweighed him, and after the last three weeks, she felt like she was rattling in her clothes.

Without invitation, Quick began walking down the long aisle between the caskets, touching each one, some of the first and oldest with familiarity.

Niffy rose to his feet, pushed up his loose sleeves, and crossed his arms. His thin, golden viper spiraled up toward his elbow. Antigone jogged after Quick, worried about what the monk might do.

"Who," Niffy repeated, "is this?" He cleared his throat, looked around like he wanted to spit, thought better of it, and swallowed. "Antigone, answer me."

"His name is Quick," Antigone said. "Quick, this is Niffy. He's a friend—an ally—from the Cryptkeepers of Monasterboice in Ireland."

"Not merely from," Niffy said. "I am now the first Cryptkeeper of Monasterboice. I hold the last patrik. I came to call the Order of Brendan back to her true roots, to the laws from before the first foul treaties were formed. But like an old-fashioned Irish fair, things took a turn. Brooks were donnied, lives were lost, and the O of bloody B is in ruin. Now I've seen a thing or two, and you, friend, just may be counting as a thing or three. Explain this light flashing about you like lightning in a peacock's arsefeathers. Mmmm, you have the look of a boy wizard, or I'm a pagan."

Quick stopped directly in front of Niffy and looked up at him.

"Have ye any answers for me?" Niffy asked. "Or shall I plant you in one last Burial before we've left?"

"None may be deep enough for what comes," Quick said. "Aside, child monk."

"Child?" Niffy snorted. "Spake the shirtless infant? What business do you have here?"

"The business of my friend, Borodon, the one you call Brendan, he who oversaw my Burial. His children are in need. He has a fallen son I would see. My words have been given."

Quick slipped past Niffy and stood at the base of the black casket where a large white sheet draped over Rupert's form.

"Antigone," Niffy said. "What plan is this?"

Before Antigone could answer, light from Quick's hand whipped the shroud away and sent it floating over the neighboring caskets. Rupert's lifeless body, still shirtless, still wearing his hospital pajama pants, lay as cold and still as clay.

Quick examined the bottoms of Rupert's large bare feet, and then he touched the sides of the black box beneath the big man. The stone rippled, popped, and groaned. After a moment, it began to change shape, stretching its sides, shrinking at the foot, levering Rupert up on a slope toward Quick.

"This is witchery," Niffy said.

"It is not," said Quick. "I serve your Master, not the master of my mother. I will break no laws."

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"Your mother?" Niffy asked. "Who might your mother be? Are we supposed to know her, then?"

Antigone jumped forward. "Doesn't matter right now. I asked Quick to check Rupert. He has the touch of life."

"The touch of life?" Niffy said. "Antigone, your Order is at war with such things."

"My Order is nothing but a pile of rocks right now," Antigone said.

With Rupert nearly upright, Quick stood on his toes and touched the holes on the big man's bare shoulder and chest. The puncture wounds from Babd Catha's talons rippled shut. Quick traced the burns on Rupert's jaw where his beard had been partially torn out, and then ran his hand down over the thick nest of scars on Rupert's chest. Finally, he placed a thumb on each of Rupert's eyelids and then his forehead.

After a long moment, Quick sighed. "He could still return," he said, "if his Maker wishes. My mother's blighted wound is gone. His clay is sound enough for a soul rider. He is not far, not yet three days gone or beyond the call of creatures, but I will not command his return." Quick looked directly at Antigone, his dark eyes were unemotional and held no sympathy. "I will not even request it," he said. "It would be a cruel and unkind invitation. This was a man made of pain, and he has left it behind. I will not ask him to return to such burdens, to the chains of fallen mortals, now that he has tasted freedom. Back in this old clay, he would only be eager to leave it again." Quick turned back to Rupert, tipping his head to one side and studying the dead man's face. "He is tasting his first peace, and he drinks of it deeply."

"Who cares about unkind? Just invite him!" Antigone blurted, eyes hot. "Do it! Touch him again, please! Wake him up. Enough peace, Rupe! We need you! Tell him we need him!"

"Antigone," Niffy said quietly. "You have brought the son of a demon with the look of a boy druid into a sacred place. He should be returned to his Burial, and that quicker than his name. His touch cannot be trusted, but listen to his words. Let us say the old prayers for a fallen Avengel and leave a great man to his peace. Rupert Greeves is with many heroes in this place. It is where he belongs."

Antigone slumped onto the cold floor beside Rupert's feet. As she did, the ceiling shook. Small stones rained down from the ceiling and the columns, bouncing on caskets and coffins, chipping statues of the long dead. It was not an earthquake. Antigone had felt something like it just weeks ago. A bomb. The Ordo Draconis was coming, and they loved announcing their approach with thunder and collapsing stone.

"The undying are coming," Quick said. "I must go. The stone will keep me. You must go, too. It is not yet time for your long peace."

Quick turned away, walking briskly back toward the stairs out of the crypt, taking his light with him.

"It's happening, Tigs," Niffy said. "We've waited too long. Come." The mohawked monk and his golden patrik followed after Quick, leaving Antigone in darkness.

Closing her eyes and biting her lip, Antigone rolled onto her stomach, resting her forehead on her crossed arms. The tightness in her throat and chest exploded into quaking spasms. This was the end. Where would she run? What was the point? She let her nose and eyes drain onto the old stone floor. Who cared? It was a crypt. Surely hundreds of people had snotted all over the floor through the centuries. She was just one more.

Another boom. Another storm of small clattering stones, and this time they bounced off her back, her arms, even her head. She barely felt them. She didn't care.

A large hand grabbed her jacket between her shoulder blades and jerked her to her feet.

"Shameful," Rupert Greeves said behind her, his big voice echoing through the crypt. "Antigone Smith, you keep your feet!"

Antigone spun around, facing the living form of her Keeper. Rupert Greeves towered above her, as big and healthy and powerful as ever, his broad chest rising and falling with steady breath, the darkness of his torso making him almost invisible in the shadows, Niffy's now distant patrik sparking a golden glint in his eyes.

"Rupe," Antigone said. Her mind spun, unable to rise from grief to belief so quickly. "What's?—How? I don't—Rupe. But how?" She reached out and touched his hand. It was warm. "You're alive. You're really alive. Niffy! He's alive!"

Antigone gave up thinking and slammed into the big man, hanging on as tight as she could, not caring that she was spilling a flood of hot tears down his ribs.

Once again, the ceiling shook.

Rupert patted Antigone's back and then gripped her shoulder. "Go on then, Smith," he said. "No time for tears. Enemies at the gate respect no reunions."

END OF CHAPTER 3 ✵

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THE TEMPLE STOOD EMPTY AT THE EDGE OF the village, encircled by a crown of aspens. The villagers, when they had to pass by, cast anxious glances at the carved figures arching like serpents from the eaves. Even the magpies, whose dome nests filled the crooked boughs of the nearby trees, avoided the ancient structure. In the twilight, long shadows crept along the wide shingles, lingering well after daybreak. Deep within the temple, tucked away like a glowing seed in a hollow shell, was an empty wooden throne.

Cora couldn't see the temple as she crossed the crowded village square, but she could feel it.

The temple was waiting, just like the rest of them.

Tomorrow, the Winter King would return to Hrimsby, slipping into human form like a banner unfurled, and the village teemed with preparations. Cora passed hopeful merchants hawking their goods from canopied stalls, harried women buying last minute supplies, and children twirling sticks twined with green and gray ribbons, the Winter King's colors. The town spared no expense to welcome their god.

And he doesn't care about any of it¸ Cora thought. *He cares for nothing but himself.*

The late autumn rain had turned the village square into a squalid mess, and Cora flinched as a young boy ran past, splashing mud on the hem of her linen shift. It felt like a reprimand for her dark thoughts. Or perhaps for delaying when her mother had sent her to buy more thyme for the Winter's Feast. The early morning mists had all but disappeared. She pictured her mother hovering in

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High Aldorman Fyodor's kitchens, waiting and worrying.

Cora pushed her way through the crowd, narrowly dodging a bundling herd of pigs. Skirting around the stables, she hurried up the wide road toward the High Aldorman's vast stone house and her waiting mother. Her fingers tightened around the soapstone jar that held the dried herb. The jar was barely half-full, but it was all Abelone had—or claimed to have. Hopefully it would be enough. As head cook in Fyodor's kitchens, Cora's mother was wholly responsible for the feast. The food had to be perfect; Greta's position depended on it. And without her mother's wages, their family wouldn't survive the winter.

Lost in the fears that churned like whitecaps in her mind, she didn't hear the footsteps behind her. Like everyone else, Cora kept her guard up when she walked near the woods; the flooded fens and knee-high willows were perfect hunting places for draugar, the undead. But worry smothered her caution, and she didn't realize she'd been followed until a hand gripped her arm.

Cora shrieked and spun around, throwing up her hands to protect herself. The jar slipped from her grasp and flew skyward, its polished sides glinting in the autumn sun. Cora reached for it helplessly, already knowing she was too late. Luckily, the boy behind her was a head taller and decidedly more agile. He brushed past her, his nimble fingers curling around the smooth stone and folding it to his chest.

"Peder!" Cora grabbed for the jar, but the brown-haired boy dodged her easily. One hand held the thyme above his head, the other pointed at her.

"You promised you wouldn't pass the stables without saying hello."

Cora snorted. "I made that promise years ago."

"Promises don't shrivel up and die, Cora Nikolson. I said I'd throw a cat into Abelone's sleeping quarters every time she called you draugar-kin, and I haven't let you down yet, have I?"

Cora grimaced. "You'll need to find another cat." She was still seething from her interaction with the shopkeeper's daughter. While many of the villagers regarded Cora warily—as if her family's curse might rub off on them—Abelone seemed to revel in her former friend's descent into poverty.

Peder's smile faded. "Again?"

Cora thought of the way Abelone's eyes had lingered on the stains and patches of her overdress, and her cheeks warmed. To add to the humiliation, Cora's clothes, her hands, even her hair, reeked of onions. She shrugged. "You'd think she could find a more original insult."

Peder held out his hand. "Come back to the stables. I've got a new straw figure for you. It's got a beard like Master Abelson's."

Cora wished for the thousandth time that she could forget her duties and stay with Peder, sitting in the hay like they had as children, sharing flatbread topped with skyr and sometimes wild berries, if they were lucky enough to find any. But the Winter King had made different plans for her family, and none of them had been kind.

She shook her head. "I can't. And I need that jar now. I'm already late."

Peder's expression sobered, and his eyes moved over her face like he was examining a tapestry. Cora knew this look. He was reading her mood, calculating how upset she was. Quickly, she let go of her skirts and arranged her face into a smile.

"I'm fine."

Peder raised his eyebrows. "Very convincing."

Cora sighed. "I'm not trying to convince you, I'm asking you to give me back the only thing standing between my mother and a ruined feast."

"Oh, come now." Peder waved a dismissive hand. "Her feasts are incredible. Everybody thinks so."

Not all of the feasts, Cora thought. Because there had been one mistake. And there couldn't be another. High Aldorman Fyodor had made that very clear. "Yes, thank the King and his eternally benevolent reign," Cora said in a high, mocking voice.

Peder's eyes widened, and he took her arm, pulling her close.

"Careful, Cora, the King has sharp ears."

Cora made an intense study of the mud beneath her shoes, unwilling to meet his eyes. Peder had sworn years ago that he'd keep her safe, that he wouldn't abandon her like the others had. *Tight as a promise, you and I.* But Cora had lived long enough to witness even the strongest promises snap under the strain of disagreement. Peder was blindly loyal to the Winter King, and on this issue, they stood on opposite banks of an impassable river. The rift in their friendship was yet another gift from their beloved ruler.

"Then he already knows how I feel," Cora said. She pulled the jar free. "And I suppose he doesn't care." Cora walked away with the spice jar held close to her chest. She could feel Peder watching her until the road curved gently around a copse of trees.

As she rounded the final bend before the High Aldorman's house, the wind picked up, carrying the sharp, salty smell of the sea. Hrimsby was surrounded by forests that stretched on three sides toward the ocean. On the fourth side, freshwater streams rushed down the mountains, splitting off like the veins on the back of her mother's hand before disappearing into the sea. After Winter's Day, the peddlers that crowded the market square would cross the mountains and return to the warm southern cities, before the snow on the pass isolated Hrimsby. *Before we're trapped here,* Cora thought.

A high arch and two sturdy wooden doors marked the servants' entrance at the High Aldorman's house. As the chosen mediator between the god-King and his people, Fyodor lived in the largest house in Hrimsby, and almost a quarter of the villagers worked for him. Cora pushed her way inside, past maids carrying wreaths and linens and men hoisting stacks of kindling across their shoulders. The frenzy of preparations hadn't lessened in the kitchens: knives chopping in rapid unison, servants gossiping, and her mother issuing brisk orders in the midst of it all. *She works twice as hard as everyone else*, Cora thought with a swell of pride.

Greta's eyes lit up with relief when Cora handed her the thyme. "Thank the King. I found a bit in the back of the larder, but not enough for the final seasoning. Well done, Cora Quickfoot," she said.

Cora's throat tightened. She wished her mother could see that she had grown up and out of the nickname her father gave her when she was little, running fast into his waiting arms.

Greta hurried off, and Cora warmed her hands by the fire, savoring the moment of peace. The tension in her shoulders lifted slightly. She had averted disaster; things were still under control.

"Cora!"

Edith, Greta's second cook, called to her from across the room. She was a small, efficient woman, and such a skilled baker that Fyodor had insisted she leave her husband's store and come work for him. Her ringlets, tied up in a loose bun, were a darker version of her daughter Abelone's golden ones.

"Did Abelone find the thyme?"

"Yes," Cora responded. *Did you tell your daughter that I'm cursed?* The words sat heavy on her tongue, threatening to tumble out, but she swallowed them back.

"I knew I'd saved some in the back." Edith paused and gave Cora an exasperated smile. "Why are you standing there, child? There's a mountain of pots that need scrubbing!"

Edith turned away and Cora reluctantly threw herself back into the flurry of preparations for the day she hated most of all.

END OF CHAPTER ONE

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THE FUNNIES

ALICE

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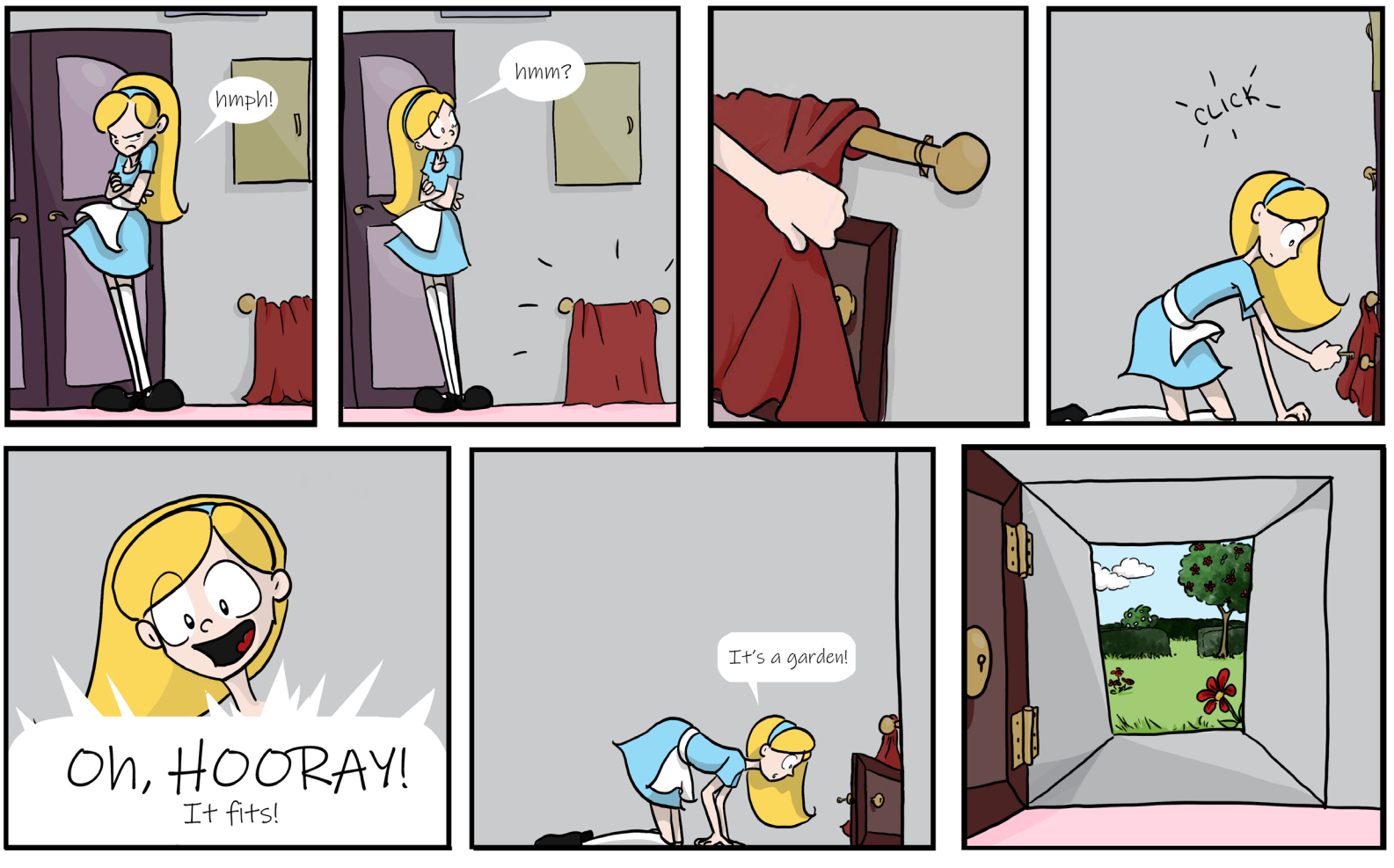

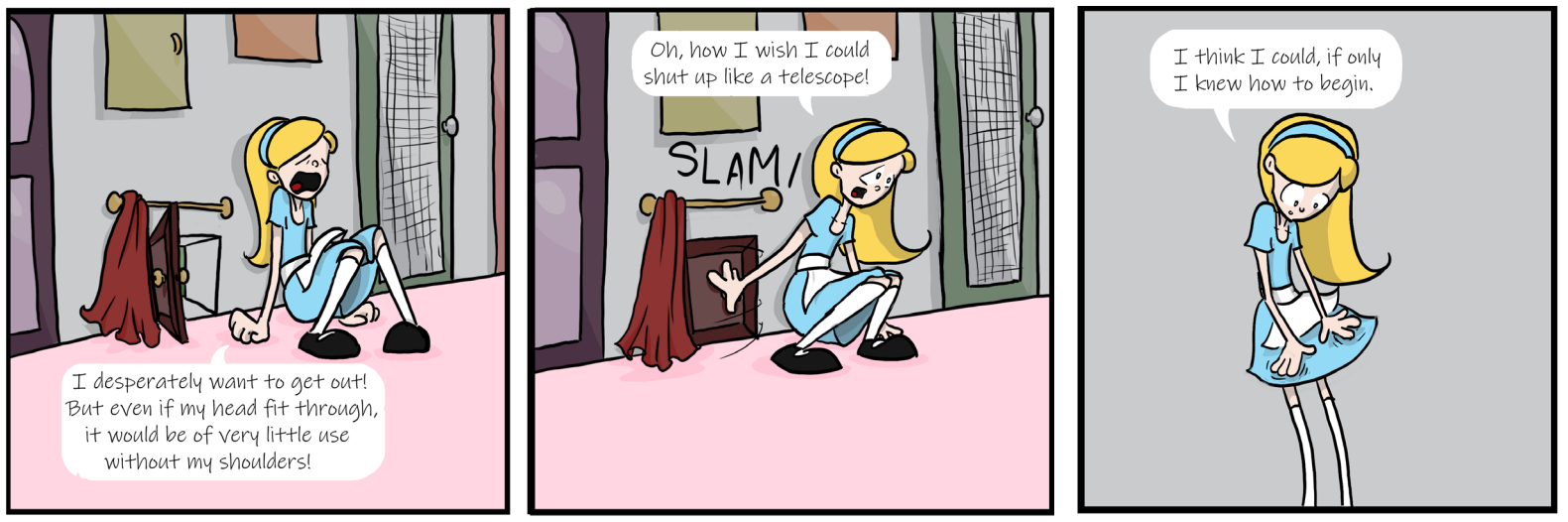
I desperately want to get out! But even if my head fit through, it would be of very little use without my shoulders!
Oh, how I wish I could shut up like a telescope!
SLAM!
I think I could, if only I knew how to begin.

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"Drink me."
Well, I won't be doing THAT in a hurry. I'll check to see if it's marked 'poison' first.
I've read enough books to know that if you drink much from a bottle marked 'poison,' it's sure to disagree with you, sooner or later.
What a curious feeling!
Nope. No 'poison.' Not even a skull.
(GULP!)
I must be shutting up like a telescope!
HOORAY! I'm now the right size to go into that darling garden!
Oooh... I left it locked!
Gotta go get the key!
WAAAAAA!

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CHAPTER 3

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The Silent Bells

CHAPTER FOUR

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4

NO ANTS

Cyrus Smith could feel himself sinking slowly into the mud where he stood in what had to be some kind of village square. The warm rain was falling so thick that he had to keep puffing water off his lip to breathe. Even constant blinking was not enough to keep his eyes focused on the men gathered around him. Behind the men, clustered bamboo houses on stilts spilled waterfalls from frond rooftops. The green cliffs towering above it all were masked, not only by rain, but by swirling horsetails of clouds trapped in the valley.

"Where is she?" Cyrus asked again. "The girl." He held his hand even with his collarbones. "The small one. She was with me."

No one responded. Cyrus slurped his feet up out of the mud, turned in place, and began to sink again. More men had gathered behind him, all armed. Cyrus adjusted invisible Patricia above his left hand to keep the keys from digging into his wrist. The Dragon's Tooth and its splintered bamboo handle were down his waistband. Cyrus regripped the hilt of the long, tooth-forged sword he'd used to kill the skeletal transmortal. He twisted both wet hands back and forth until he knew the blade couldn't slip from his hands. The hilt was wrapped in something rougher than leather, more like sandpaper, easily peeling the damp skin off the top of his callouses.

"If you want to fight, I'm ready," Cyrus said, and he began to sway slowly like a boxer, shifting his weight from foot to slurping foot so he wouldn't be stuck in place when the attack came. He was thoroughly surrounded now, by men with swords and spears and bows, but he did have the Dragon's Tooth. To kill him, the men would have to pin him to the mud and pull the tooth out of his shorts first. Very doable with their numbers, but unlikely that they would know that was necessary.

Plus, Cyrus had trained surrounded by Nolan, the Captain, Rupert, and Jeb. He might not have lasted long, but still, he had trained. It felt like a different lifetime now, a time when he had still wanted promotion within the Order, back when he had assumed that the O of B would continue to exist after the war with Phoenix and the Ordo Draconis was over. So, not that long ago. Months.

The mirrored room had been small in comparison to many of Ashtown's training rooms, but it was well out of the way and out of use, which is why Rupert had chosen it for Polygoner fencing and blade training. Racks of bamboo practice swords had been brought in to line the walls, along with real blades of varying lengths, shapes, and sharpness. The floors were stone beneath mats, soft beneath the feet, but only for half an inch. Brutal to fall on.

Cyrus could still feel that last session. The sweat in his eyes, the rubber in his muscles, the burn in his lungs and in the welts up and down the outside of his legs and arms, across his shoulders, and in one brutal stripe across the back of his neck—a vigorous gift from the Captain. That blow had dropped him to his knees and caused Rupert to try and stop the session. But Antigone and Diana had both been seated in a corner, watching, waiting for their own turns. Cyrus had very much wished that they hadn't decided to watch his workout, but given that they had, he wasn't about to tap out due to pain.

"If you stand and spin like a hen on a spit," The Captain had said, pointing at Cyrus with a long practice sword, "you'll get your wish. You'll be nothing but a hen on a spit."

"Hens aside," Nolan had said, "as useful as they may be, the key is to remember that multiple attackers will subconsciously strike at different vertical levels so as not to risk entanglement with their allies. As you turn, always anticipate a change of level."

"Can I just say," Jeb had added, "you're doing great. No one lasts long against four skilled attackers. Just try to last longer than last time."

"Thirty-seven seconds then!" Antigone shouted, laughing. "Aim for a new Rus-Rus world record!"

Cyrus hadn't even been able to muster the energy to be annoyed or snark back at his sister. He had known that Antigone was just trying to fire him up. He would have done the same for her. It didn't work. But he did notice one thing that had mattered very much to him in that moment. And it had worked.

Antigone had razzed him. Diana hadn't laughed.

Cyrus had turned back to Rupert and raised his heavy, two-handed practice sword.

"Again," Cyrus had said. Rupert studied him with lowered brows. His thick black arms were crossed and he held a short bamboo sword loosely in each hand.

"Everything said was true enough," Rupert said. "But when this moment is real, which it must be soon, never fight to last. There's no safety in defense. Forget survival. Fight to win. Choose a weakness. Attack. Press. Surprise."

Cyrus nodded. Rupert raised both swords. Cyrus knew that even facing Rupert alone at the Avengel's full effort, the fight would never last thirty-seven seconds. The big man still wasn't even sweating.

"Clock," Rupert said.

"Ready!" Antigone answered.

"Begin," Rupert said.

Cyrus spun away from Rupert and leapt at the Captain's head, too close for his long-bladed practice sword. Surprise and then pleasure flashed through the Captain's eyes just before Cyrus crunched the butt of his sword into his ancestor's creased forehead.

As the Captain slipped and caught his balance, Cyrus bolted to the nearest wall and spun around with his back against it. He had broken out of the square of enemies.

"There you go, Cy!" Antigone yelled.

Jeb looked shocked.

Nolan was grinning.

Rupert smiled.

"Good lad," the Captain said, rubbing his brow. "But I'll not be going soft on ye again."

All four men approached with weapons raised.

Cyrus didn't care. The rubber was gone from his muscles. Adrenaline had erased the burn in his welts. And he couldn't stop his own smile.

Diana was laughing. Clapping.

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Cyrus rotated in the mud again, keeping his stance wide with each slurping and slipping step. The men were much too close now. Like a hen on a spit, he thought. He had to make a move soon.

"If you won't tell me where she is," Cyrus said, "I'll find her myself. Mercy!" he yelled. "Mercy Rios!"

The torrential rain was all he could hear. Wherever Mercy was, the rain was probably all she could hear, too.

"Well," Cyrus said. "Alright, then. No point being a rotisserie chicken."

Dropping into crouch, Cyrus exploded to his right, careening headfirst into the chest of a small shirtless man holding a very large wooden blade. The man's lungs emptied as he hit the mud, and Cyrus tucked into a somersault across the top him. Rising to his feet, Cyrus slipped, rose again, and began to slop-stagger toward the nearest bamboo house less than twenty yards away. He needed to get his back to a wall, any wall, and fast.

Cyrus had been shot before, on the lawns of Ashtown, right after ripping the Dragon's Tooth out of young Oliver Laughlin's hands when death had become impossible. The bullets had felt like fists, punching right through him, but the pain had faded quickly.

That experience had not prepared him for the sensation of arrows.

The first sting hit between his shoulder blades and the second higher up, just below his collarbone, where his wound from Babd Catha had only just healed. Both arrows erupted more than six inches out of his chest. Rain rinsed the blood from their pale stone tips.

The impact spun Cyrus around, but he stumbled in place and caught himself before falling. He wanted to yell threats and curses and promises of death, but his breath was fluttering from the burning shock of the wounds. He could shape no words. Every muscle in his body was tightening in panic, and his heart cramped, bucked, and spasmed before skipping into a rabbit rhythm.

Dozens of surprised eyes were watching Cyrus as he forced himself upright and fought to control his breathing. He should be dead. Or at least dying. He knew it, and they knew it.

After a few eternal seconds, Cyrus's body began to calm. His lungs steadied and his heart slowed, along with his sense of time. Every raindrop seemed to hang in front of his face long enough for him to name and train, but the pain in his chest was still just as loud and real as the arrows sticking out of him.

"Still here," Cyrus said. He whipped the sword down his chest, severing the arrow shafts where they emerged from his now tented shirt. Sharkskin, he thought. Not leather. The hilt of his black sword was wrapped in sharkskin. Handy in the rain. He was pretty sure sharks were a great deal more waterproof than cows.

Assuming a wide fighter's stance, Cyrus lifted his sword to shoulder height with both hands. No fewer than six bows were drawn and pointed at him. But given how slow the rain seemed now, he thought he had a decent chance of whipping any shafts out of the air.

"Stop!" A man's sharp voice pierced through the roaring waterfall of rain. "Weapons down!"

Cyrus watched every weapon lower, but he kept his own sword high.

A tall, barefoot man, wearing shorts and a blood-splotched linen safari shirt, limped out into the muddy square, followed by the bare-chested warrior Cyrus had stolen his sword from. The barefoot man's short hair was black and rebellious, refusing to lie flat even in the rain. His cheeks were broad and high, his jaw angular and hard, his dark eyes hooded by angry brows.

While the man limped, he tied a broad green scarf around his waist. When he had finished, his warrior escort handed him a broad-bladed machete with a golden hilt, dotted with emeralds as green as Patricia's eyes.

Cyrus had seen the weapon before, in an old picture of Rupert and his parents that had been hanging on a wall in Lewellyn Douglas's lakeside training camp.

Cyrus lowered his sword when the man stopped in front of him. Pink water, rain mixed with blood, dripped from the man's ragged linen shirt.

"Are you who I think you are?" Cyrus asked.

"I do not know," the man said. "Are you one of the undead devils sent to plague us, or are you carrying dark charms?" The man nodded at the arrow stumps in Cyrus's chest. His accented voice chopped up words like an ax, but his English was easy and confident. "To survive those wounds, you must be…something more than boy." The man tucked his machete into the scarf against his left hip. As he did, Cyrus stared at two patches on the man's right shoulder. The first was the black medieval boat of Brendan in a yellow circle—the crest of the O of B. Just below the boat, there was a green circle with a white tadpole sprawling diagonally across it. The tadpole's tail was bent into the jagged shape of a lightning bolt—the symbol once used by Llewellyn Douglas.

"I'm Cyrus," Cyrus said. "My mom is Katie."

The man blinked away rain. "And?" he asked.

"Katie," Cyrus repeated. "Your sister."

"This was never my sister's name," the man said.

Cyrus was sinking again. He slurped his shoes free. "C'mon, man!

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You know who I'm talking about. I saw a picture of you with her when my dad and Rupert Greeves came to this place. They gave you that sword, and you gave them dragonflies. Or they just took them, I don't really know. But apparently, they left behind clothes, too. I mean, you're wearing Ashtown patches! I'm Katie's—your sister's—second son. She always said I looked like you. I'm Cyrus, and you're…" Cyrus trailed off. The man raised his dark brows and stared at him, waiting.

Cyrus could remember standing in Llewelyn's timber lodge with his mother and Antigone and looking at all the old pictures. It hadn't been that long ago, and he could remember one picture perfectly—his young mother's intricately embroidered dress that Antigone had loved, Rupert and Lawrence, both battered and malnourished, and the shirtless boy in the skirt trying to duck out of the frame. His mother had said her brother's name. It had been simple. Bono? Bonzo? Bano? Dano?

"Hanno," Cyrus said. "You're my uncle Hanno."

Hanno erupted into laughter.

"Uncle Hanno? I have not been called Hanno in many lifetimes." The ax in the man's voice was softer now, his syllables stickier, dipped in honey. He grinned. "Not since visiting my sister and her children in a house beside the sea on my way to university. You were small and soft and full of tears, and only the one with the sun-yellow hair could speak and be understood. He was the last to call me uncle."

Hanno put his hands on Cyrus's shoulders and turned him around.

"You will have to explain to me why you are here," Hanno said, "And how. Brendan's Order has busied itself elsewhere for many years. We have been left to tend our own nightmares, and not always well."

Cyrus's breath jumped as Hanno gripped the arrows that were still sticking out of his back. He felt the two shafts move inside him, and his breath jumped, fluttering in his lungs. Then, with two quick jerks, the arrows were out. Hanno tossed the feathered ends into the mud and turned Cyrus back around.

"I am grateful that our blood is strong in you, sister son," Hanno said. "I am grateful that you struck down Bonehand without pity. I failed and was tortured and would soon have been killed. I am grateful that life cannot escape you, even with Cataan arrows in your heart and lungs. But most of all, I am grateful that your touch brings death to the undying. Worse things than Bonehand need slaying."

Radu Bey laughed out loud. Azazel served him, not the other way around. Azazel was the power in Radu's fist, in his heart and mind, and, when necessary, even his most brutal physical form. The dragon could be as angry as he liked. Anger benefited them both. And yet, looking down at the empty front steps of the Ashtown Estate, Radu couldn't help wondering if this was a mistake. Down there, Azazel had lost the tip of his forked tongue to a teenage boy, and with it, his ability to lie to the minds of his victims. Down there, Babd Catha had lost her head. But, as long as Cyrus Smith was in South America and Rupert Greeves was no longer in this world, Ashtown was ripe fruit, ready to fall into his hand. With time, the Burials, despite all their locks and charms, could be opened, and the world's first transmortal army would turn its undivided attention on the nations of men.

Another bomb ripped manicured lawn up from courtyard and heaved it into the sky. Radu Bey watched it like a boy studying an ant hill after striking it with a clod of dirt—an ant hill he had struck before and that had swarmed and bitten and stung.

This time, there was no swarm. Not one scurrying groundskeeper. No alarms. No return fire. Not so much as an Acolyte shaking an angry fist as the plane. The bell towers of Ashtown were silent. Only the geese had stirred from their slumber and fled away over the lake.

The ants were elsewhere. Or dead.

Across the whistling bomb bay, Oliver Phoenix Laughlin was strapped into his own seat. His eyes were on Radu Bey, not the ground. He had not wanted to come. He felt, although he would never admit it, a great deal of trepidation about returning to this particular ant hill. The last time he had arrived with confidence in his cunning, in his trap. The transmortals were supposed to have destroyed the O of B and then he, armed with the Dragon's Tooth, would have tamed the transmortals. He had been flanked by his Reborn sons, armed with the Reaper's Blade, and eager to watch the destruction.

The courtyard below was the site of his shame. Cyrus had ripped the tooth from his hands and, by the time Oliver's Reborn had opened fire, Cyrus had been unkillable.

Add to that memory a pair of huge, violent, and entirely unanticipated statues, and the sight of his carefully Reborn sons being flung all the way outside of Ashtown's walls—and Oliver excused his own displeasure at the idea of returning. Phoenix had spent years uncovering the secrets of Ashtown from inside the walls, and he knew that many dangerous things remained, like the statues. More than he could possibly anticipate.

In the blue yawning of predawn, a large plane shaped like a single wing circled the smoke rising from Ashtown. The bombs had not been dropped to destroy, but to flush out any resistance that might somehow remain in the Brendan's ruins after the death of Rupert Greeves.

Radu Bey looked down out of the open bomb bay door in the floor of the plane as it circled Ashtown. A fresh crater now gaped in the courtyard beside the fountain. More enjoyably, the roof of the great Galleria had received a bomb in the center of its peak and was now collapsing. Lines of white winged statues were tumbling after each other into the expanding hole.

Like fallen angels cast into the pit, Radu thought, and the bloody, dragon-shaped blister in his chest burned and writhed in furious response. Azazel, the dragon gin that Radu Bey had bound into himself, the last of the gin that had been used by the Dracul family to form the Ordo Draconis, did not enjoy the reference to damned angels.

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Of course, it didn't help that Oliver was surrounded by transmortals of the most bloodthirsty type, and that he had tried repeatedly to excuse himself from this assault. Gilgamesh had gone so far as to paint charms of power all over his face and hands and arms with what could only be blood. Others had done the same.

Oliver knew that his focus had to be on finding Cyrus and the Dragon's Tooth before the transmortals did. But Radu Bey's focus was on keeping Oliver occupied so the transmortals could recover the tooth first and never let it out of their sight again. When that happened, it didn't take a sage to know that Oliver, and Phoenix within him, would face total and final annihilation, while every other mortal would experience an ancient and bloody subjugation.

But for now, Phoenix and the dragons were allies, at least in name. Oliver felt more like a hostage. Although he had been allowed two of his Reborn as bodyguards.

Radu Bey stood up, grabbed the broken chains that hung from his wrists and began to wind them around his hairless forearms.

"Dragons!" Radu Bey shouted.

"Devour!" the transmortals shouted back.

Radu tore his shirt open, revealing the blistery red dragon writhing beneath his skin. And then he dove, like a swimmer, straight down out of the open bomb bay. As soon as Radu was clear of the plane, Oliver saw his transformation. The man was gone, replaced with an enormous dragon the color of scabbed blood. The stumps of six wings, severed centuries ago, waggled uselessly as the dragon fell. His long tail snapped and cracked like a whip, and at the very tip, a cluster of dark horns trailed sparks and smoke behind him.

One after the other, the transmortals dove out of the bomb bay after Radu Bey. Not one of them wore a parachute. All of them went headfirst and, other than the dragon, all of them tucked into tight balls and bounced off the green turf of the courtyard and landed on their feet, running after Azazel, the great dragon with the smoking tail, who was already climbing the once great stone steps into the silent ruins of Ashtown.

Oliver looked around the empty plane. His two Reborn were still in the plane, both with fluttering gills on their necks and long knives in their belts. Both vaguely green. They hadn't been allowed guns, but that didn't matter much now that things had gone better than Oliver could have hoped. No one had thrown him out of the plane. No one had even asked him to jump.

Unstrapping himself from his seat, Oliver stood up, yawned, and stretched. Then he nodded at the cockpit.

Both of his hybridized and customized sons leapt up and charged the cockpit. It was time for another transmortal to jump out. And then the plane could reroute due south. Ashtown could be ground into sand anytime. But Cyrus Smith had been found, and he must be collected. The Ordo had already sent another plane hours before, so Phoenix no time to lose.

FREE: worn out tires. Perfect for re-sealing abandoned swimming pools and other summertime needs. You haul.

Antigone sat in the corner of the room, hugging her knees, not listening to anything at all, watching Rupert's every move, waiting for him to disappear. She felt the shiver and quake of the bombs, but she did not hear them. She saw Alan Livingstone's joyful tears as he embraced Rupert, but she did not hear his booming laughter. Rupert was shouting and pointing and counting heads while he pulled on a shirt and then a heavily pocketed leather coat with patches dotting the shoulders, and finally strapped on a belt, heavy with knives and holsters. He was wearing tall boots over his white, hospital pajama pants.

Everyone still alive in Ashtown had been gathered below ground in the room that had once held the now-exploded and drained water maze. Two nurses, Dennis Gilly, little Hillary Drake, Alan Livingstone and his blond boys, Silas and George. Big Ben Sterling. Brother Niffy pushing Jax in a wheelchair. Towering Wiglaf with his white blond beard, looking dubious and out of place, but carrying the pale and still unconscious body of Nolan like a sack of mud. Jeb hopping around, carrying his crutches instead of using them, and Diana Boone wearing two large backpacks and holding a large lever-action rifle that looked like something out of a melodramatic western. The room was boiling with noise and echoes and, despite the quaking of the ceiling and the floors, everyone but Wiglaf was wearing a smile and laughing.

The dragons were coming. The end was near. And yet, Rupert was alive. He was strong and healthy, wearing none of the bruises or breaks or limps that the others all were. His eyes were bright, his words quick and certain. He had taken no time at all to reorient himself to life, and to the protection of Ashtown's small band of survivors. When he had given orders, no one had understood, but no one had argued. They had simply raced, laughing, to obey. And now they were here, in the footprint of the obliterated water cube, awaiting their Avengel's next orders.

Slowly at first, Antigone realized that everyone was looking at her. Diana, standing, nudged Antigone's foot with hers.

Antigone jerked back into the world of sound.

"Antigone!" Rupert boomed. "When is the last time you've seen Arachne?"

Antigone thought. She wasn't sure. Arachne hadn't been the same since Gilgamesh had betrayed them all before the last transmortal invasion. She had spent more and more time venturing into the deep corners of Ashtown alone.

"Um, pardon me, Mr. Greeves, sir?" Dennis Gilly, sitting cross-legged just in front of Rupert's feet, raised his hand like a schoolboy. He was wearing his old staff cape and bowler hat, tied with a ribbon beneath his chin. Rupert nodded at him.

"As she is a transmortal, won't she be fine without us, sir?" Dennis asked.

"True enough," Alan Livingstone said. "We can't wait for her or for anyone now, mortal or transmortal. We might already be too late to make the planes."

"We're not going to the planes," Rupert said. Alan crossed his thick arms, waiting for more explanation, but none came. "Antigone?" Rupert repeated.

"I really don't remember when I saw her last," Antigone said. "At least a couple days."

"She may have left us," Rupert said, "and sought out her own hiding place. I won't fault her if she did." He turned to the no-legged cook. "Ben. We have more than a dozen mouths. How many days of food do we have?"

Big Ben Sterling looked down at a small pile of canvas sacks at his metal feet. "A week if I'm a cautious man," he said. "Longer for those with pounds to spare already on the bones."

"Split the food up across the packs," Rupert said. "No one touches the provisions without permission. Everyone have water?"

Every head nodded. Even Antigone's. She was still listening.

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The floor shivered. Dust and splinters of stone rained down from the ceiling.

"I wish we had time for a proper feast," Rupert said. "I wish I could sit with each of you and tell you what I remember of my dreams before I forget them forever. I wish Ashtown still stood tall against the darkness and wisdom sat in Brendan's seat, with laughter in the halls, and faithful men and women in the field. But such things are not for us. Another path has been prepared for our feet. We are the last embers of a once great fire. We must survive, not as animals, content to eat and breath and sleep, but as light, as sparks. We will all die, but when we do, let us die setting other souls alight. Even in death, I pray we will set fires throughout the world to haunt and hunt the darkness until dawn comes forever."

Rupert picked up a pack at his feet and slung it onto his back.

"Up," he said.

Antigone scrambled to her feet, picking up her pack. Everyone else in the room did the same. Everyone but Jax.

"Brothers and sisters of Brendan," Rupert said, "what is required of you?"

"All," said the Boones and the Livingstones and Dennis Gilly. No one else knew the words. Rupert smiled.

"It's an honor to be back with you. Even if only to fall beside you again." He cleared his throat. "The storm grows!"

"Let us fill our sails!" Antigone said, along with every other voice in the room.

As the echoes died, Rupert nodded. When every pack had been shouldered, when everyone who could walk was on their feet, Rupert spoke again.

"I ask you all to trust me today," he said. "Ashtown has failed you. The Brendan and the Sages and I have all failed you. The O of B will become whatever grows again in these ashes when we are gone. What we do now breaks no laws and no vows, because those laws and those vows are no more. They were shattered long before the stones of this place, they were shattered by enemies within." Rupert moved toward a door in the darkest corner of the dark room.

"Rupe?" Alan asked. His voice lilted up with nervousness. "What are we doing?"

"We are descending," Rupert said. "We must walk the long-forbidden paths."

✵

Arachne sat on the filthy, white, tile floor of the Polygon. Naked light bulbs hissed on worn wires strung between the thick pillars throughout the vast room. Behind her, in front of an old niche broken in one of the rear walls, water was spattering on the floor.

The room, the temperature, the vastness of the space made the Polygon a heaven for hunting spiders, the least patient of the arachnids, unwilling to spin and wait and snare. Being a weaver herself, Arachne had less experience with eight-legged floor wolves, hunters and huntresses all, but she could still feel them all around, they could still feel her, and they were just as eager to obey her as any spinner. And they were much faster than her usual friends. Already, two fat sacks on her back had filled up with thousands of new friends.

Arachne had ignored the bombing, but she had known what it meant and who was coming.

A different kind of spider was within reach in this deep place, and that felt more urgent. Hundreds of them. Thousands. Many that had been driven out of the room in which she now sat and who were now uneasy to return. Metal shavings may be uneasy about where a magnet has been placed, but they cannot help but come.

The first whip spiders emerged from the drains, clattering quickly across the tile floor toward the ancient young woman they knew to be their mistress, without doubt and as deeply as they could know anything. Hundreds more came from the ceiling, scurrying down the pillars and down the Polygon's many corners, slipping on the tile and falling, clattering in piles on the floor with a sound like spilled cereal.

When thousands had gathered around Arachne, lashing their venomous whips, crawling over each other in mounds for a chance to touch their mistress, she sent them all away. Not far. But into the shadows. Into hiding. And then she waited, cross-legged, eyes closed.

Finally, the heavy door to the Polygon scraped open and an enormous man stepped inside, bigger than a bull, head scraping the ceiling. His face and every inch of his bare arms were covered with ancient charms, written in blood.

"Gil," Arachne said, her voice as cool as the air.

"Where are they?" Gil growled. "Arachne, if you protect them, you know what we'll do to you."

"Traitor," Arachne said. Her tone was low and smooth, soothing, like she was instructing a small child. "Oath breaker. Liar. Useless bag of meat and wind."

Arachne opened her eyes. As she did, her army of whip spiders flooded into the space between her and the huge man.

Gil's bovine eyes widened.

"Come," Arachne said. "Receive your reward."

END OF CHAPTER 4 ✵

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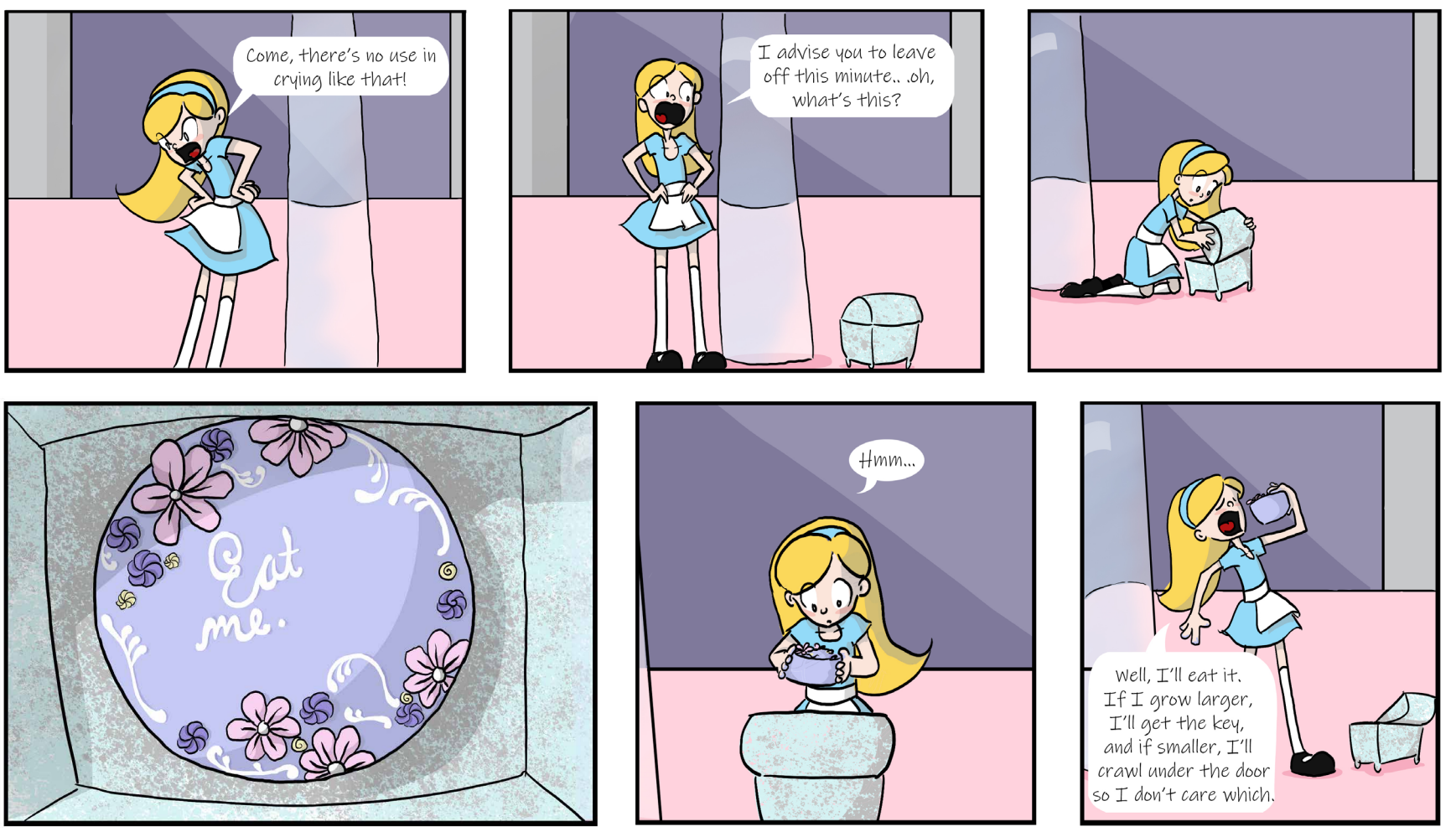
THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN


Come, there's no use in crying like that!
I advise you to leave off this minute.. .oh, what's this?
Eat me.
Hmm...
Well, I'll eat it. If I grow larger, I'll get the key, and if smaller, I'll crawl under the door so I don't care which.
munch!
Why, I'm not going anywhere!
I suppose I MUST eat the whole thing.
MmmMMm...
Curious and curiouser!
bonk
Now I'm opening up like the largest telescope that ever was!
GOODBYE FEET!

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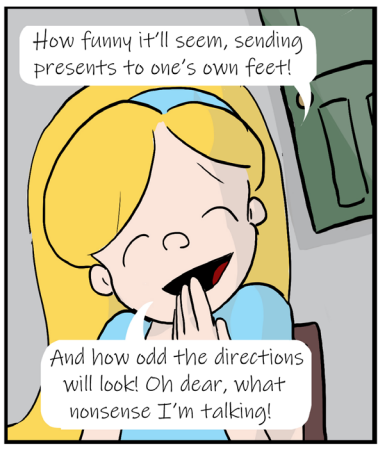
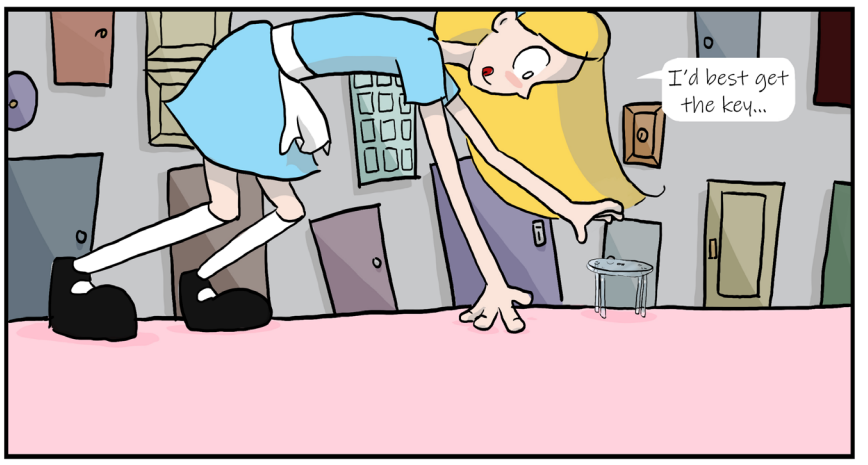
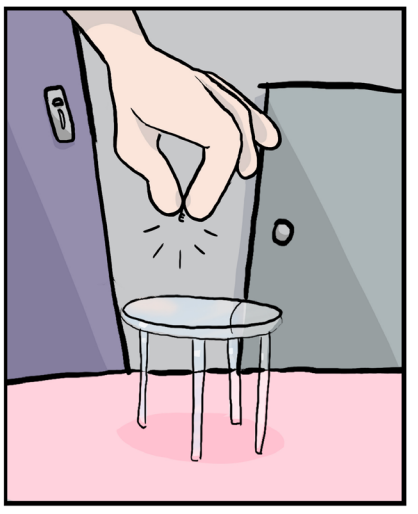
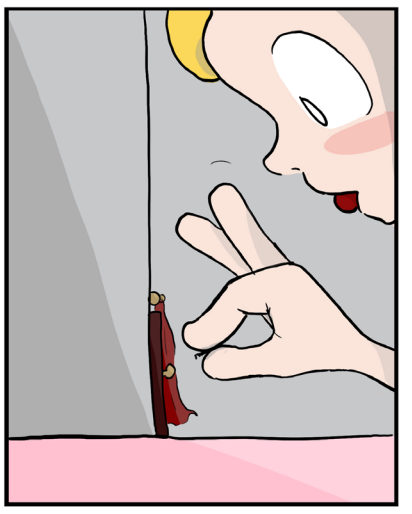
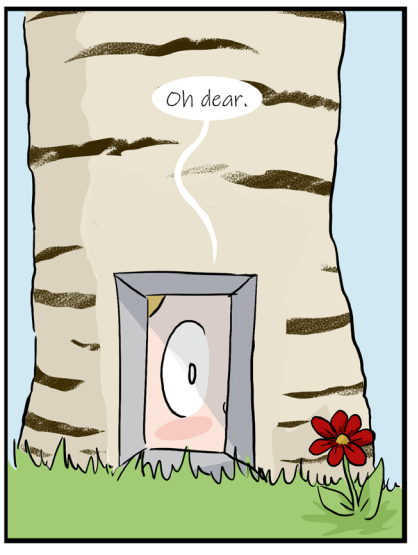
Oh, my poor little feet,
I wonder who will put on yourshoes and stockings for you now, dears?
I'm sure I shan't be able!
I'm a good deal too far off to trouble myself about you,
you must manage the best you can.
But I must be kind to them, or perhaps they won't walk the way I want them to go!

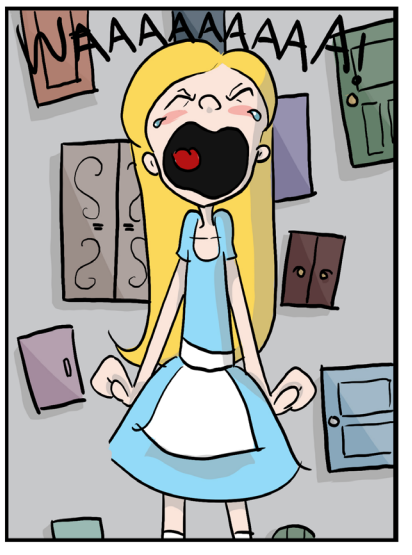

How funny it'll seem, sending presents to one's own feet!
And how odd the directions will look! Oh dear, what nonsense I'm talking!











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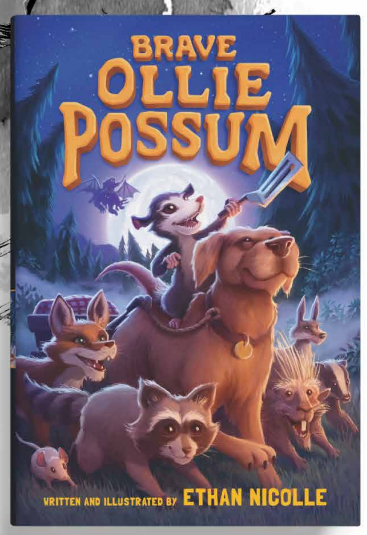

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CHAPTER FIVE

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5

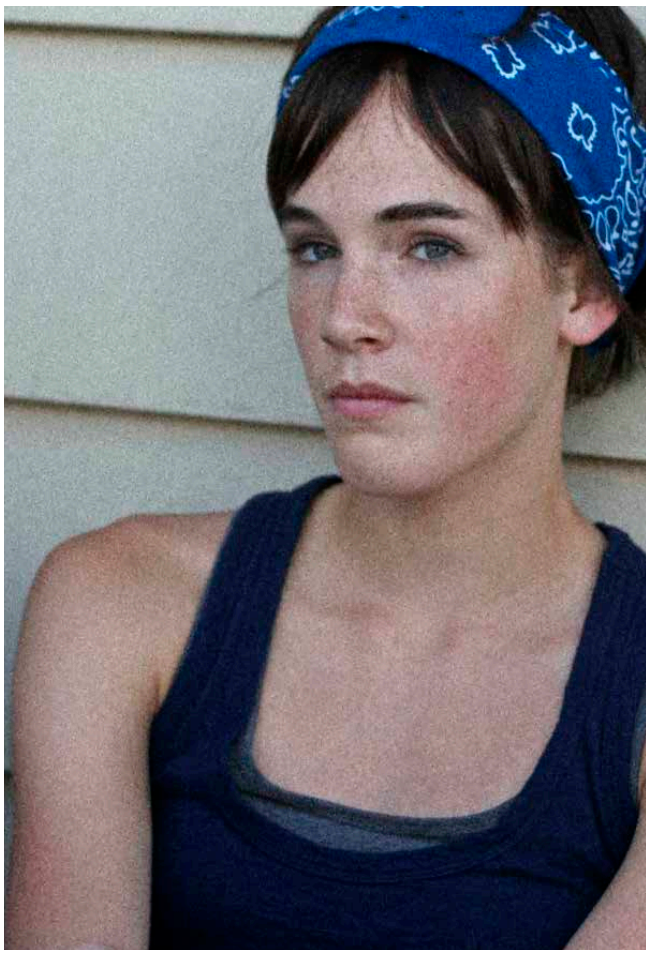
FORBIDDEN WAYS

THE JANGLE OF CHAINS AND THE ECHOES OF squealing hinges ricocheted through the wide, rubble-filled corridor of Ashtown as Radu Bey threw the great timbered door to the Galleria wide open. What had once been the very heart of the Order of Brendan was now an empty tomb, a robbed and desecrated grave.

Radu Bey smiled. The room and the rubble pleased him, and he paused for a moment in the doorway to take it all in. High above him, pigeons were roosting in the black beams that held the once beautifully vaulted ceiling. Two of the black beams now hung in splinters around a gaping hole in the peak. The Galleria's mezzanines still lined the walls, mostly intact. Only one of the supporting scaled stone columns now lay broken on its side like an old tree. Radu assessed the others. He would topple them all before he left this place. And every wall. Every dome. Every vault. He and his dragons would not leave a single stone stone standing. But for now, it would be of use.

Wooden chairs were strewn around the stone floor on beds of broken glass. Wind was disturbing pigeons in the high empty windows. Radu Bey crossed the threshold and paused. Shutting his eyes and flaring his nostrils like a predator, he inhaled, long and slow. Below the humanity of his senses, beyond the scent of dust and smoke and lake water on the wind, the dragon bound within him could smell something truly beautiful. The enormous room was sour with despair.

Opening his eyes, Radu Bey couldn't stop another wide smile, although no one was there to see it—no one but the crowd of portraits that filled the wall at the far end of the large room. At the very bottom of that painted crowd in extravagant frames, the image of a boy done in violent strokes of red and black was looking straight at him. Despite the abstraction in the art, Radu recognized the face of Oliver Laughlin.



Antigone from the Dragon's Tooth book trailer!

"Phoenix, my resourceful friend," Radu said quietly, "your portrait already hangs."

In front of the wall of portraits, a large black chair sat at an ebony table. The table held dust, shattered stone, a few pigeon feathers, and an old book the size of an ice chest. With his broken chains dragging behind him on the stone floor, Radu Bey crossed the rubble and glass in bare feet and made straight for the table. The dragon in his blistered chest twitched and rippled as he did.

"Be still," Radu said. "There is nothing to fear. Brendan's children are gone from this place forever."

The dragon writhed. *Fourteen are here.*

Radu Bey hesitated. "Fourteen? Where?"

Deep. Beneath us. Three of your kind are with them.

"Which three?" Radu asked.

The blood blister dragon spun in a complete circle beneath Radu's skin before replying.

The thief. The weaver. And… a Dracul bane.

"Dracul bane?" Radu asked. "The Smith lives?"

No, Azazel responded. *Another. Older. Stronger.*

Radu Bey kicked through a pile of wooden chairs and stopped in front of the ebony table.

"Stop riddling," he snarled. "Name the traitor if you know him."

Azazel hesitated, and when the words floated up into Radu's mind, they were cold and quiet, almost cautious.

Every dragon still crawling in the dust knows his name. He is called Wiglaf. The Scylfing.

Wiglaf. Radu Bey had heard the name before, but he had heard many names in his long centuries. This one did not strike him as particularly notable. And he didn't care for the chilly caution in Azazel's tone.

Dragging his wrist chains up the edge of the table, Radu reached for the bale-sized book and pulled it toward him.

A thick, textured piece of paper fluttered off the top. It was a letter, stamped with three seals across the top—a medieval ship in a circle, a long, six-winged dragon in a rectangle, and a winged chess knight in a shield. Crisp handwriting covered the sheet on a slight angle.

Dragons,

We leave this book and these buildings in your hands for the time being—tokens of the Order of Brendan's past. The Order's future, however, will be with us, forever out of your reach until the moment you are slain or Buried by our hands. The bells of Ashtown will remain silent until our return. But wherever our feet touch the earth, they shall ring. Where we climb the clouds, they shall peal. Where we sail, they shall sing. We may be few, but, by the Grace of the One who knit us together in our mothers' wombs for just such a time as this, we are too many for you.

Ichabod for now,

Rupert Greeves
Blood Avenger twice born

Radu Bey stared at the signature. Greeves? It wasn't possible. It couldn't be. Rupert Greeves was dead. Radu had seen the wounds inflicted with his own eyes. Babd Catha's poisonous talons would have taken their toll on any mortal…even after her death. Radu Bey felt his heart accelerating, his blood heating, the dragon in his chest writhing with pleasure at his annoyance. He had been informed of Rupert's death with certainty. The dead man had even been shrouded and placed in the crypt of his predecessors. The letter must be a lie, a ploy by the survivors to anger and worry him.

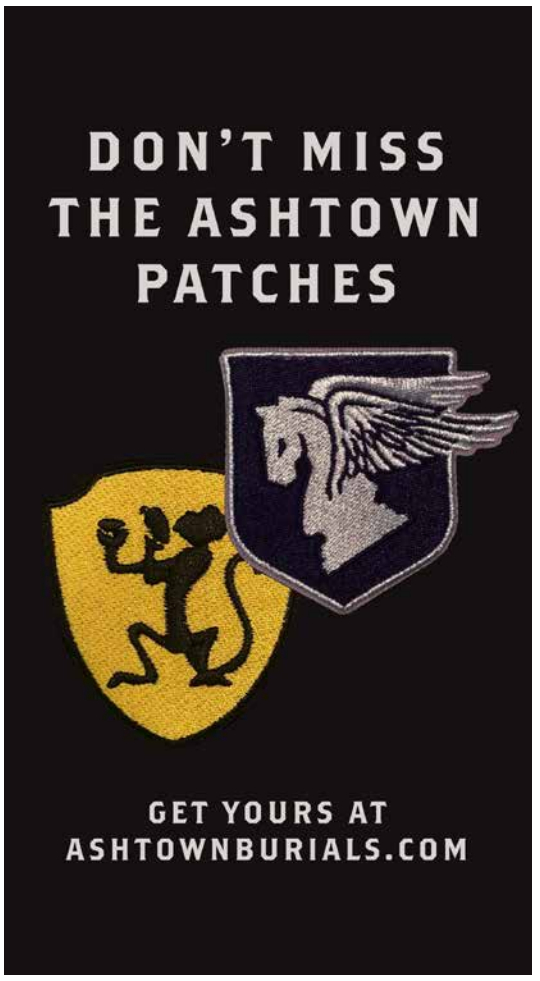
Twice born. Had Rupert escaped the grave? Had the Smith boy used the Dragon's Tooth in one of Ashtown's old resurrection rooms? If so, the darkness of the ritual would have made him a friend, not a foe. But if something even stronger than necromancy had occurred, if Rupert had been sent back into this life from beyond it, if he had been truly twice born…Radu didn't like the thought. Such cheats from beyond the grave were always heavy with purpose, and never the kind of purpose he wanted to witness.

"Eight mortals in the depths below us," Radu said aloud. "But is Greeves among them?"

The dragon was too lively in his chest to focus, too pleased with the taste of fury to give an answer.

Radu Bey closed his eyes and gave himself over to the dragon that dwelt within him. He fell forward in the shape of a man but landed on enormous black claws. His scales, the color of dried blood, rasped like blades on whetstones as he mounted the Order's black table, and the stumps of his six severed wings throbbed, straining hopelessly at the air. Before he, now fully Azazel, reached out for the souls hiding somewhere below, he lifted his long tail and flung a ball of fire from its spiny tip toward the wall of portraits. Flames spilled across Oliver Laughlin, rippling and distorting his image before consuming it completely and igniting his many painted ancestors above as the fire climbed the wall.

Azazel then slammed his flaming tail down on the heavy book until the pages crackled and the leather binding popped and hissed like half-hearted bacon. The dragon whipped the burning book into a pile of the scattered wooden chairs and watched as a bonfire took shape. Smoke chased the pigeons out of the high, empty windows. Lastly, because even fire was not sufficient for Azazel's hate, the dragon lifted his still flaming tail and splattered the top of the Order of Brendan's ancient ebony table with the white, powdery excrement of a predator that digests every part of its prey but the calcium of the bones and teeth. Only then, when the serpent's hate for Brendan and all his children had been fully expressed, did Azazel leap down to the stone floor and calm his mind enough to grope for the thoughts of his enemies.



ANTIGONE LEANED HER HEAVY PACK AGAINST THE WET STONE WALL OF THE arched tunnel and crossed her arms tight against a damp chill that not even her leather jacket could keep out. She was watching bits of foam race past on the fast, black river at her feet. Cables and gears and baskets and the occasional naked light bulb were suspended from the ceiling above the water. Behind her, cables and much smaller baskets rose up through the ceiling to the remains of a shack in the once great courtyard of Ashtown. The constant throaty rush of the river seemed to erase her awareness of the present moment and sent her burrowing into memories of the past. Her first time in this underground aqueduct had been when she and Cyrus had been racing to reach the Order of Brendan before their wounded lawyer died, and the pealing bells marked the deadline for the Smiths to present themselves as William Skelton's Acolytes. It had all seemed so very intense at the time, but now, even despite the bullets and the whip spiders, those first furious days in Ashtown seemed more like a childhood game in comparison to the war and tumult she and Cyrus had been through ever since.

Before Horace, before Eleanor Eldridge, before Gunner and Robert Boone and the Captain, before the old Brendan and Bellamy Cook and so many others; before them all, William Skelton had been the very first to die, the night after he had given Cyrus his keys and The Archer had burned and Antigone and her brother had climbed down into this very same cold, dark, loud river tunnel from the bathroom of a pizza place.

What was it Skelton had said to Cyrus about death? Antigone could still hear her brother's bad, gravelly imitation of the old smoker's voice.

"Know what happens when you run from Death too long? It becomes a friend. A destination. Home. Your own bed. The place where your friends are waiting. You stop being afraid. You stop running."

It was not a sentiment Antigone could understand at the time, but she thought she could understand it now. Running forever. Fearing forever. Survival just didn't always seem worth it.

Antigone shivered. Why was she being so morbid? Maybe because all the faces of the dead, all their voices, were present in her memory constantly. Why was she still running? Death was where her father was waiting. Even before Skelton, Lawrence Smith had died. Antigone hadn't known then that his death had been part of the story of the Dragon's Tooth—she hadn't even known things like the tooth and the O of B and transmortals existed. She knew now, and she wished that she didn't. How many more people she loved would die before this fight, this race, was over? Was she next? Cyrus? Dan? Her mom? Rupert again? Did it even matter? Why was she still running? Antigone shivered even harder, this time trying to shake her mind clear of all the morbid questions. Rupert had just come back from death. Of course she had to keep running. She had to keep fighting. Her mom was still alive somewhere. And Dan. And Cyrus, as far as she knew. They couldn't just roll over and let the transmortals run amok in the world. They had to find a way to stop them, to end the Ordo Draconis, even if the O of B was never restored. She had to trust Rupert. She had to try. She had felt hopeless without him, but she still wasn't managing to be hopeful with him. Especially if this was his idea of escaping.

Right now, he and the others were probably waiting for her further down the tunnel, in the shadows past the wire basket lift.

Rupert emerged from those shadows, walking back toward her along the stone ledge by the water. He was wearing double holsters along with bandoliers of bullets and an enormous canvas pack over the top of a chocolate bomber jacket. He had the Captain's Dracul sword and a rifle strapped to the back of the pack. As he approached, Rupert extended his left hand to Antigone. In his right hand, he held a huge ring of keys.

"Found her!" he shouted over the sound of the river. Given Antigone's mood, Rupert's wide smile seemed inappropriate. "C'mon, Tigs. Stay close."

"You said we were leaving Ashtown," Antigone said. "But that direction is the lake. And the only exit I know in the other direction is

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Milo's Pizza."

Rupert laughed. "Oh, Milo's does sound lovely right about now. But we're heading for a different exit, entirely without pizza. But it does have some family history for you. A dark bit. And more recent than most Smith lore. Been walled up and banned since I was four or five after an incident with your dad and your aunt back when Bobby Boone was Avengel." Rupert sighed. "I wish he was around to tell the story first-hand, but we'll have to make do."

"It's walled up?" Antigone asked. "Did you bring dynamite? Or sledgehammers?"

"A back way blew open," Rupert said. "Either in the bombings or thanks to those clay giants you and your brother unleashed."

Something warm and smooth spilled into Antigone's mind, flowing down her spine and into her limbs like cream. It wasn't just warm. Soft. Comforting. And it was followed by a voice…

Antigone Smith, you do not have to run. Give me your pain, your loss.

Antigone flinched in horror. That explained the awful darkness of her mood. "He's here," she whispered to Rupert. "Radu Bey."

Rupert leaned in close, studying Antigone's eyes. "He's reached you?" he asked.

Antigone nodded.

"He must be close," Rupe said. He grabbed Antigone's hand and squeezed it tight. "But your little bruv did us a favor before he pulled his runner." He smiled, wide and bright in the shadows. "Lopped off the fork in that serpent tongue, didn't he? More than likely eaten by seagulls. Azazel can still burrow in with words and despair, but his lies won't be as deft. He's lost his touch. Go on then. Test him. But fight the mood."

"With what?" Antigone asked.

Rupert grimaced at her like she was a child failing at simple Math, like he had looked at her whenever she had forgotten a basic fighting stance in blade training. Which, she realized, is pretty much what she had just done. Fighting stance of the mind, of the heart, of the soul.

Antigone Smith, you do not need a fighting stance. You do not need to resist.

Wow. You're pretty tuned in, Antigone thought in reply. *I guess it makes sense given how moody I was suddenly being. Was that you pushing me there? Or was that what made getting into my head easy?*

Your father is dead.

Yeah, Antigone thought. *He is. Breaking news there, snake eyes.*

Give me your pain. I can take it from you forever.

What's your favorite smell? Antigone wondered. *Most people say bread, but Cyrus's is rain on hot asphalt. I really love the smell of butter melting on fresh pumpkin bread. I used to love the smell of erasers, too, back when I was in school. Weird, right? And Christmas trees, when they're still fresh.*

What are you doing? The dragon asked. *I can take your pain. I do not care about smells.*

Sure you do, Antigone answered. *You probably love the smell of nice, sweaty fear. Despair probably has a smell, too. People probably release a toxin or something when they give up, right? Something like that would be right up your alley. It probably smells like toe fungus.*

Why are you being flippant about your father?

Antigone laughed out loud. "About my father? No dice. Never. I'm being flippant about you."

"Tigs," Rupert said. "Well done, love. Now, shake him off and let's go. He can't be in your head for this bit or he'll learn where we are."

Still here, Azazel said. *And too late.*

Where the vertical cables and wire baskets rose up through the ceiling, timbers cracked and snapped like gunshots. A long, blood-red dragon's tail twisted down through a fresh hole in the ceiling, flinging fireballs from its spiny tip in every direction. Flames splashed against the walls and spread, hissing into the dark water, sucking stones from the walls and ceiling, spilling them into the river.

Rupert broke into a sprint with Antigone right behind him. The whistling whip and whine of snapping cables filled the tunnel, and parts of the ceiling began to collapse. The stone walkway shook beneath Antigone's feet, and she slipped toward the water, catching herself and barely managing to recover from the lateral momentum of her pack.

A fireball flew above Antigone's head, close enough to singe her hair. Running had not been the plan. Hiding would have been so much better.

"Faster!" Rupert was yelling. "Go, go, go!"

The swirling balls of dragon flame revealed an iron bridge that had been hidden in the darkness up ahead. At some point in the last century or two, the bridge had been black and tastefully gothic with stairs up both sides. Now, it was collapsing, twisted, and looked to be made entirely of rust. Niffy was crossing it with Jax and his wheelchair on his back, following behind the Boones with Jeb hopping and Diana carrying his crutches. Wiglaf was already across with Nolan in his arms. Stirling and the two nurses were standing behind him. Antigone spotted Dennis and Hillary climbing onto the bridge, and then the light from the dragon flame died out, and Antigone was running in what felt like total darkness, hoping she didn't veer into the water.

And then she did. Slipping. Tipping. Her pack swung awkwardly off her shoulder and spun her around onto her back as she fell.

The water swallowed her with lacerating cold just as a bright flash of dragon fire meant for her erupted on the surface. Antigone's pack was pulling her down like an anchor when two hands plunged in and grabbed her by the straps. A moment later, she launched out of the water and all the way up onto her feet on the stone walkway.

George Livingstone held one of her pack straps. Silas held the other. Both boys were wet to the shoulder. Alan Livingstone held their free hands. Alan had provided the strength to pull Antigone out, his sons had just been extensions of his thick arms.

Blinking and gagging and spitting, Antigone didn't have time to thank anyone. Rupert was now up on the bridge unstrapping his rifle. In front of her, Alan unslung an enormous, elephant-size rifle from his back, followed by his entire pack. He tried to hand the pack to his sons.

"Go, boys," Alan said. "Now."

Antigone took one step toward the bridge before she realized what was happening. George and Silas were not moving. Neither of them touched the pack in their father's hands. Fifty yards behind them all, Azazel had widened the hole enough for him to drop from the ceiling onto the narrow walkway by the river. His smoking tail snapped and lashed and coiled like a spiked whip. Half a dozen human transmortals dropped into the tunnel behind the dragon.

"Dad, no," George said, pulling on Alan.

"No," Silas said. "Dad. Please! Not now. Not yet."

Turning to Antigone, Alan shoved his pack into her hands. When he let go, the weight jerked her down, almost ripping the canvas straps out her hands. Grunting, she barely managed to hoist it up and hug it to her chest.

"Rupe needs that," Alan said. "Don't lose it. Now go!"

The large man turned back toward the dragon. "Boys," he said, le-

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vering back the thumb sized hammer on his rifle. "Someone stands right here, right now, or we all fall." He glanced back at his still motionless blond sons. "I'll be a minute. Now go on. And if I'm longer, help each other walk the right road, whatever the toll. Kneel for no evil. Treat your heartbeats like pennies and your souls like gold. Nothing but smiles at your sisters, and kiss your mother for me. Take them, Antigone. Take them. Go!"

Rupert Greeves began to fire at the transmortals from the bridge. Antigone, flinching at each echo, turned, and staggered toward the rusty stairs, hugging Alan's heavy pack. She didn't know if George and Silas were following her or not.

From behind her the thunder from Alan's huge rifle rippled Antigone's insides, sending her stomach up into her throat. A moment later, hundreds of explosions echoed through the tunnel. Alan was firing explosive pyronewt eggs.

Rupert Greeves pushed down past Antigone as she climbed onto the rickety iron bridge. The whole structure rattled and twisted and swayed under each step. At the top, she looked back.

Rupert was herding George and Silas toward the bridge while Alan threw down his empty rifle and dug into his pockets. Antigone saw Alan pull two fistfuls of small glass cubes out of his pockets. Then he straddled the stone walkway facing the dragon.

"Go!" Rupert yelled at Antigone. He pushed both Livingstone boys up onto the bridge and into her. "Get across and find Diana! I gave her the keys!"

"Come on, dragon!" Alan bellowed. "Come see what I have for you and your devil friends!"

"Off the metal!" Rupert plowed the kids forward across the bridge. "Off the metal! Fast!"

Alan raised his arms, and Antigone understood Rupert's urgency. The glass cubes in Alan's hands each held a small dark shape. They had to be beetles. Lightning bugs. At least six. While Antigone watched, Alan clenched his huge fists, crushing the glass in his palms.

With lightning crackling around his enormous fists, Alan Livingstone charged the dragon.

Antigone turned and ran.

Off the metal, she thought. *Off the metal. He's dead. Alan Livingstone is dead. Right in front of his sons. He can't survive that much lightning can he?*

Antigone jumped off the bridge onto the walkway by the river, and her knees buckled under the weight of the extra pack. There was a dark arch in the wall above her. It had been walled in, but the stones had collapsed into a pile. The taste of metal was already building in Antigone's mouth as she climbed the loose stones in the doorway. Every hair on her body was standing up. Electricity was everywhere. The strikes had to come soon.

She could hear George and Silas yelling behind her. Alan Livingstone was chanting in another language. Transmortals were laughing.

The dark doorway was the mouth of a long tunnel. Antigone could see a lantern waving at the far end.

"Run!" Diana's voice echoed out of the tunnel. "Hurry!"

Antigone lunged and stumbled forward as fast as she could. She heard a large iron door squealing open. Wiglaf slipped past her running the other direction. Niffy was right behind him.

The thunder from the first lightning strike knocked Antigone onto her face, and Alan's pack, suddenly hot, burned against her ribs. The second strike hit while she was still on the ground. Thunder hammered her skull, her lungs, her ears. Seering blue arcs of electricity danced across the walls, revealing every bolt and old iron sconce in the walls with a crackling touch. Stones began to fall from the ceiling. Delirious, Antigone managed to roll off Alan's pack. Her shirt and the pack were both smoking.

Strange, she thought. She hadn't known smoking was allowed.

Antigone was unconscious for the next four strikes.

ANTIGONE WOKE TO THE SMELL OF BURNT HAIR. SHE WAS ON HER BACK ON a hard floor, looking up at bare, overized lightbulbs—only three lit, six dead—hanging on heavy chains from a high, beamed ceiling.

Someone was crying. Quietly. But definitely crying.

Cyrus? No.

Antigone sat up slowly, grinding salty fire in every joint. She was between two canvas packs. Silas Livingstone was sitting by her feet, hugging his legs with his head on his knees. He was the one crying. With his face hidden.

George was spreadeagled on his back next to Silas. His mouth gaped open and his eyes were closed. Blood had trickled out of his ears, staining his blond hair and pooling on the floor. Nolan, also limp, but not bloody, lay on his side beside George. A quarter-sized flake of skin was peeling off between his eyes.

The room was an octagon of smooth stone, but the base of every wall was covered with stacks of wooden frames, doors and door jams, chests and cupboards, and Antigone spotted at least one large wooden sarcophagus. A crowd of people were gathered—seated and standing—around a large plank table in the center of the room. Niffy. Wiglaf. Diana and Jeb. Jax in his wheelchair. Dennis and Hillary. Big Ben Sterling and the nurses. Rupert Greeves was at the head.

No Alan. He had stopped running.

Rupert Greeves looked over at Antigone. His face was serious, and his brows threw grim shadows down his already dark cheeks.

"Welcome to the Room of Ways, Antigone Smith. Forbidden ways, I should say. And we've paid a high price to reach them. Come. We have a choice to make. It is a dangerous one, and everyone should have a voice."

END OF CHAPTER 5

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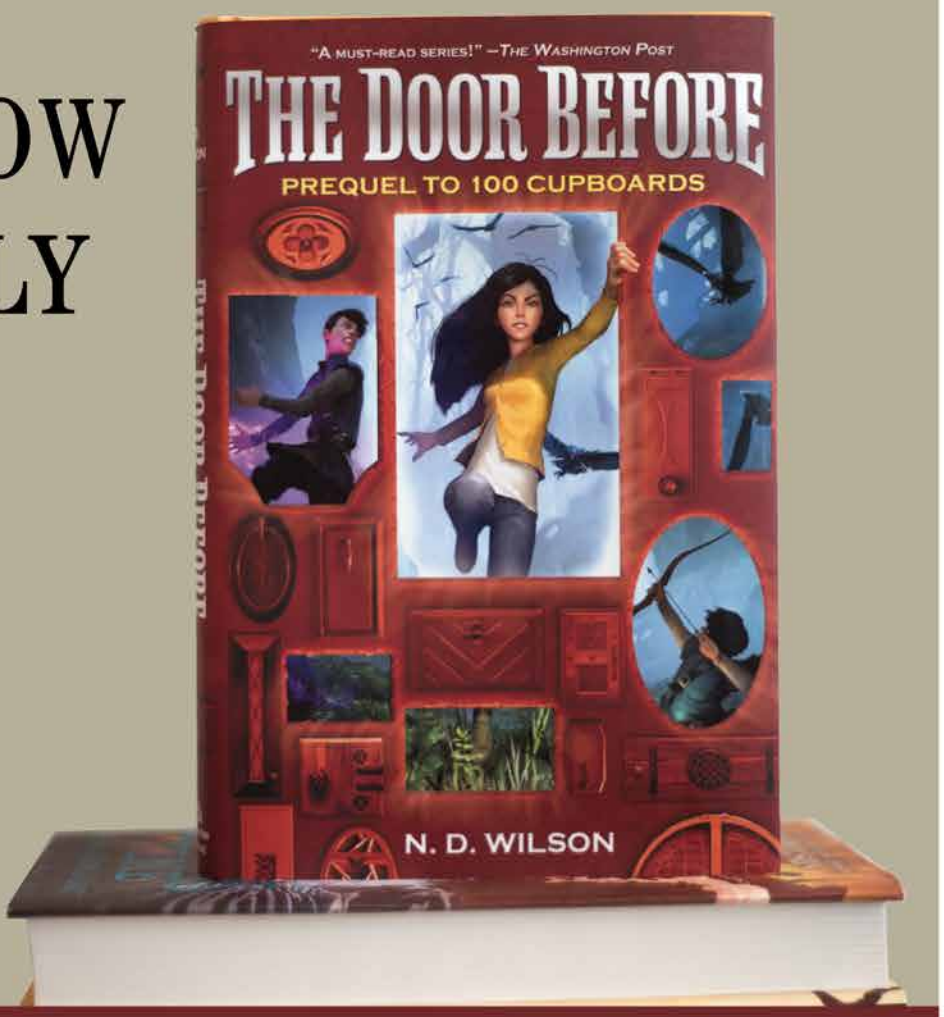

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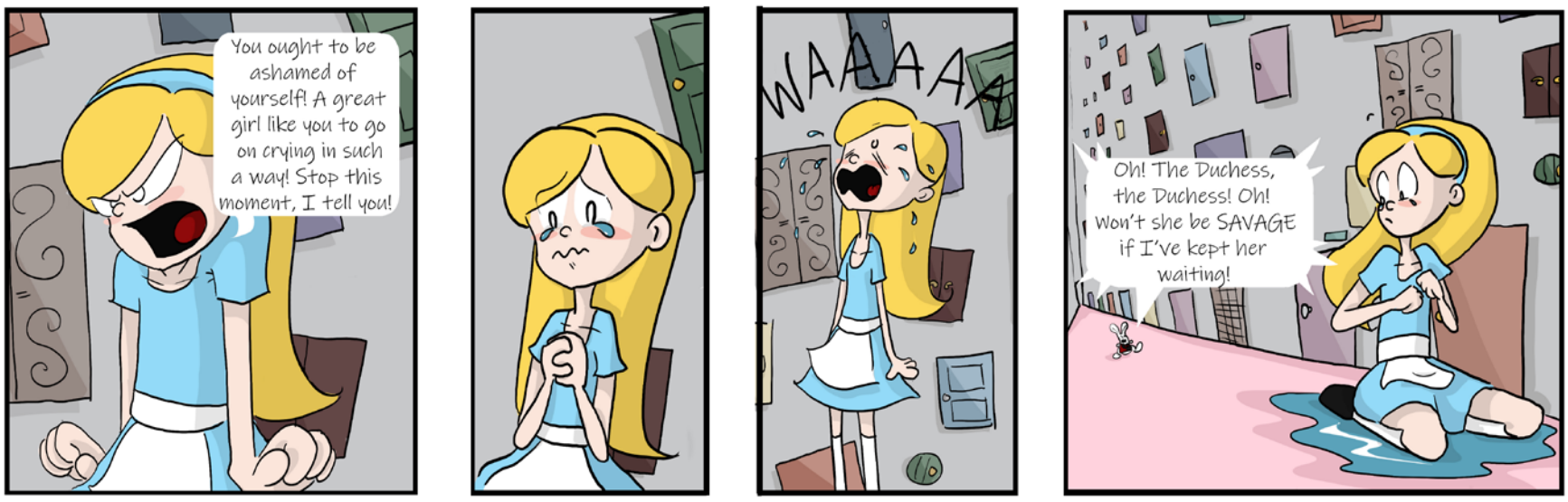
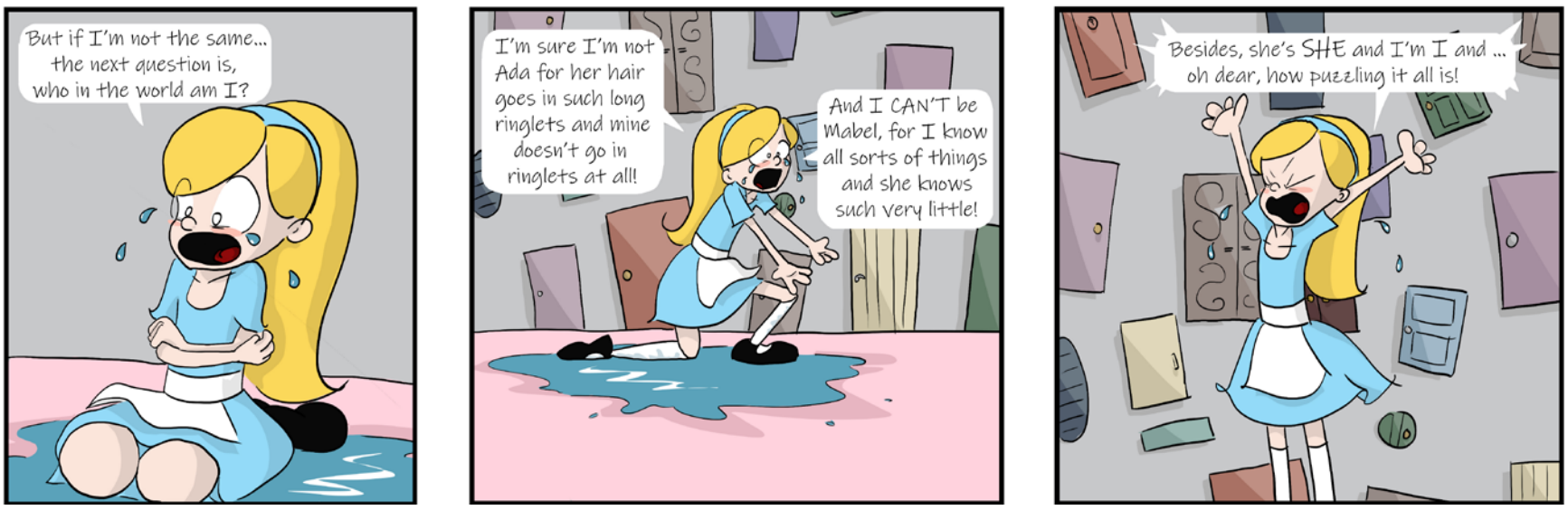
THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN


You ought to be ashamed of yourself! A great girl like you to go on crying in such a way! Stop this moment, I tell you!
WAAAAAA
Oh! The Duchess, the Duchess! Oh! Won't she be SAVAGE if I've kept her waiting!
If you please, sir...
hm?
AAAAAAAA!!

AAAAAAAAAAAA!
WAIT!
Dear, dear! How queer everything is today! And to think yesterday things went on just as usual.
I wonder if I've been changed in the night! Was I the same when I got up this morning?
I can ALMOST remember feeling a little different.


But if I'm not the same... the next question is, who in the world am I?
I'm sure I'm not Ada for her hair goes in such long ringlets and mine doesn't go in ringlets at all!
And I CAN'T be Mabel, for I know all sorts of things and she knows such very little!
Besides, she's SHE and I'm I and ... oh dear, how puzzling it all is!

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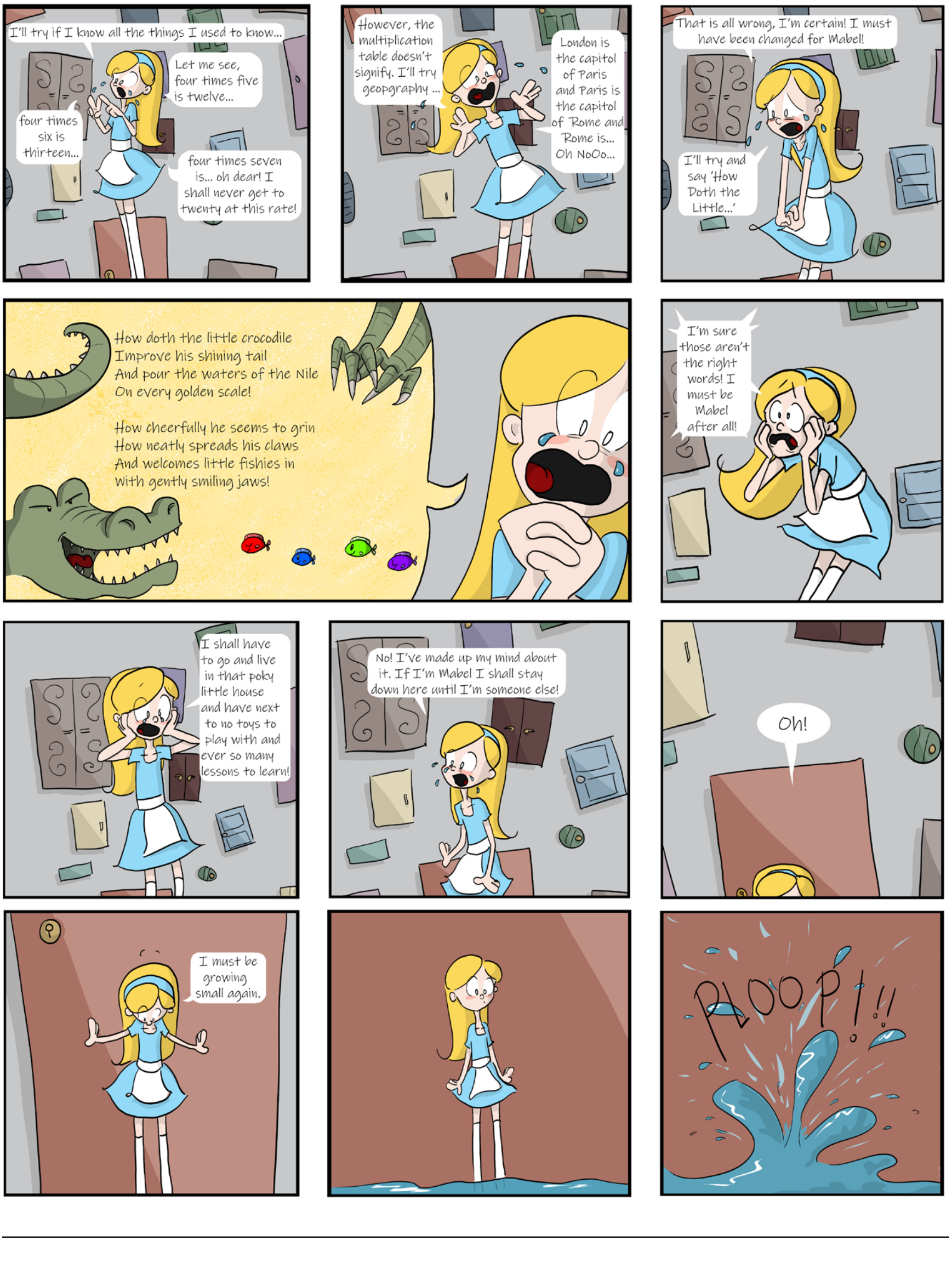
I'll try if I know all the things I used to know...
Let me see, four times five is twelve...
four times six is thirteen...
four times seven is... oh dear! I shall never get to twenty at this rate!
However, the multiplication table doesn't signify. I'll try geopgraphy ...
London is the capitol of Paris and Paris is the capitol of Rome and Rome is... Oh NoOo...
That is all wrong, I'm certain! I must have been changed for Mabel!
I'll try and say 'How Doth the Little...'
How doth the little crocodile
Improve his shining tail
And pour the waters of the Nile
On every golden scale!
How cheerfully he seems to grin
How neatly spreads his claws
And welcomes little fishies in
With gently smiling jaws!
I'm sure those aren't the right words! I must be Mabel after all!
I shall have to go and live in that poky little house and have next to no toys to play with and ever so many lessons to learn!
No! I've made up my mind about it. If I'm Mabel I shall stay down here until I'm someone else!
Oh!
I must be growing small again.
PLOOP!!!

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CHAPTER 5

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The Silent Bells

CHAPTER SIX

VEILS TORN

Only four of the Polygon's lightbulbs were still functioning on the sagging cords draped around the ceiling, and one of those bulbs was flickering, pulsing its warm, incandescent death-light on filthy, cold white tile on the walls, the columns, and the floor and casting deep shadows around the expansive room.

Arachne sat on the floor beneath the single sputtering bulb. Her legs were crossed, her hands were on her knees, and her eyes were shut. If anyone else had been there, they would have seen grief on her face, in the set of her jaw, in the pinch of her brows, in the excess moisture in the corners of her closed eyes. Arachne had no human company to bear witness to her mood, although she was far from alone. The sack over her shoulder hung empty, but thousands of whip spiders were gathered into sprawling regiments behind her, despite their hatred of light. Armies of spinning spiders were marching across an enormous, spider-silk mummy in front of her.

The whip spiders had done their stinging work, and Gil had been unconscious for more than an hour while the multitude of smaller spiders had been at their task. Gil's entire body was now shrouded in a cloth of taut silk that shown like the surface of a pearl. Gil's brow was easy to distinguish, as were his large arms, crossed across his chest, but his six-fingered hands were hidden, woven tight against his armpits.

The sound of ten thousand spiders weaving was low, but steady, like the ghost of a breeze in a leafless tree. The sound was reassuring to Arachne, the sound of her flock, her work, even disrupted by the sputtering lightbulb above her, a distant dripping, and the occasional rattle and click of the whip spiders. But every sound in the Polygon was smothered when Gil began to snore inside his spider packaging.

Arachne rose to her feet, unslung her bag, and lowered it to the grimy floor. The thousands of spiders that had been busily weaving Gil into the silk sleeve poured off of his body and began to fill the flat bag until it sat upright with the shape and heft of a sack of sand. Gently heaving the bag over her shoulder, Arachne nudged Gil's cocoon with her toe.

The snoring continued.

Arachne kicked him hard in the shoulder. The huge mummy jerked. The snoring sputtered and stopped.

"What's going on?" Gil asked. The pearly sleeve began to twist and wriggle and writhe. "Arachne? Arachne! I can see you standing right there! You promised you would never do this again!"

The tooth, keys, and charms in Skelton's hand.

"What did you promise, Gil?" Arachne asked. "This brings me no pleasure."

Arachne looked down at the clicking pool of whip spiders waiting behind her. "Come on, lovelies," she said. "You won't want to stay in here. Goodbye, Gil."

"No!" Gil shouted. "Arachne, no! You're not this cruel."

Arachne walked toward the Polgyon's exit—a flaking, iron door that was propped open with the leg of an old bunk bed. A carpet of whip spider clattered across the tile floor just behind her heels.

"They will find me, Arachne!" Gil shouted. "This can't hold me!" The cocoon kicked and twisted and rolled across the floor. "They'll cut me loose, and then I will find you! This is treachery!"

Arachne paused in the doorway, watching Gil battle her spider silk. "Keep that word out of your mouth, Gilgamesh of Uruk. I hope to see you again. Use your time in this burial to reflect on ways you could improve."

Arachne removed a lighter from her jacket pocket and struck the flame.

"Burial?" Gil asked "What do you mean, burial?"

Crouching, Arachne touched the flame to a thin fuse on the floor. Whip spiders parted around the spark as it passed through them, lighting three other fuses on the way.

Arachne turned off the lights and began to climb the stair with her heavy bag cradled in both arms.

Every spider in the Polygon followed her up the winding stairs, lining the walls and arched ceiling.

"Arachne!" Gil bellowed. "You don't know what you're doing!"

✵

Cyrus sat on a low, stone block with his legs splayed out in front of him to prevent the broken bamboo shaft that held the Dragon's Tooth from digging into his thigh. His bare back was less that twenty-four inches from a recessed firepit in the center of a long, thatched lodge. Cyrus's uncle, Hanno, sat cross legged on the floor in front of him with his green scarf around his waist and his golden-handled machete across his knees. The space between the two of them was the only emptiness in the building; the rest of the lodge was crowded with men, women, children, and even dogs. Some of the onlookers wore western clothes, some wore eyeglasses or watches, but many were wearing clothing of woven grass or tanned and beaded skins. All of them shared Cyrus's dark hair and dark eyes. Many had darker skin.

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Mercy Rios, still in her tattered, badly fitting mail carrier uniform, looking no worse for her captivity, was sitting on the floor on Cyrus's right. She had inched much further from the fire than he'd been allowed to.

Beyond the occasional cough or shuffle, the crowd in the lodge was silent, leaving Cyrus to listen to the sound of stray and belated raindrops hissing into the fire behind him from the open chimney hole above. The muted clucking of chickens roosting beneath the lodge's wide plank floorboards added an oddly comforting undertone to the moment. Or so Cyrus thought. If chicken noises were allowed, how serious could a moment really be?

The fire wasn't large, but its heat scraped at Cyrus's spine, and the skin over his backbone felt like it could split like a sausage casing any minute. The throbbing arrow wounds on his chest and back, now expertly stitched with catgut, provided his only distraction from the heat. Cyrus didn't want to show pain to his uncle, or to the large crowd staring at him, so he converted his impulse to writhe in agony into slow stretching, arching, and twisting, shifting the worst of the heat around as much of his back as he could. The keys, invisibly hidden on Patricia, slid from collarbone to collarbone as he did.

"So," Cyrus said. "What now? Why are we doing this? What do you want me to say?"

Uncle Hanno didn't answer. He didn't even blink. The firelight threw hard shadows in every crease in the man's face, highlighting twin scars on his left cheekbone along with forked webs of old worry at the corners of his eyes.

"I told you the truth," Cyrus said. "The Order of Brendan is in a war against the transmortals—the undying. I chased a dragon through a portal in a place called Ashtown, and then we took another one that opened into some kind of a jungle temple made of bones—whole skeletons stacked on each other like bricks. We've been walking through the jungle ever since. Until we fell in your stupid net."

"Stupid?" Hanno asked. "Without the net, you would be splatter on the rocks."

"Sure," Cyrus said. "I should have said your wonderful and thoughtful net."

Cyrus looked up at the bare-chested warrior standing behind his uncle. The man once again had his black-bladed sword strapped onto his back. Cyrus's damp and bloody shirt dangled from the man's hands.

"And that guy was ready to kill me," Cyrus said, nodding at him. "He was working for the dark side. I mean, if someone has a skeleton arm, that should be a strong clue, right? Bad guy. Move on."

"In my captivity, Jay was working to preserve our purpose as he was able," Hanno said. "Do not judge what you do not understand."

Cyrus laughed, and then arched his back, easing the heat slightly in the center. "Sure. Just doing his best. Even if his best meant killing a couple innocent strangers who just happened to drop by?"

"Jay?" Mercy asked. "His name is Jay?"

"'Dropping by' this valley has not been permitted for thousands of years," Hanno said. "Entering uninvited is guilt, not innocence. And yes, he is called Jay."

"Can I move now?" Cyrus asked. "The fire is brutal…"

"No," Hanno answered, smiling. "Not until we see truth's high tide in your mind and in your words. Then you will move from the flame."

"I've been telling the truth," Cyrus said, twisting sideways and giving his left side to the heat.

"All of your truth," Hanno said. "We, the people of this valley, your mother's people, have had long relations with Brendan's order, with his monks and his adventurers, and with his enemies, the undying. Many of Brendan's disciples have lied to enter this valley with a mind to glimpse or steal its dark fruit. Your own father was one such. We have often been deceived and failed in our duties, but never completely. We have succeeded, but never completely. We have been ruled by Brendan and by devils, and we have overthrown both. We have slain kings and emperors and pirates and slave traders. Empires have fallen into rot while we have remained. The undying dragons have ruled us. They felled our people as sacrifices for their bone temples in the hills. We are not children, we will not be deceived again. Speak your true purpose in this place, nephew."

Cyrus shifted his right side to fire. "To survive? To find my way back to Wisconsin."

"You struck the life from Baldwin of the bone hand. Such a killing has not occurred here in the length of any mortal life. You kept your lifeblood and your breath with our arrows through your chest, but you say you are not of the undying or the flesh-bound demons. Tell us all your truths and tell them fully. Then, nephew, the fire will sleep, and we will decide your fate, and after that, eat."

"Fate. Right," Cyrus said, twisting in his seat. "I'll do my best, and as quickly as I can…before I burn alive." Tugging the Dragon's Tooth out of his shorts, Cyrus flipped the silver knob open and held the bamboo shaft up high, so everyone in the lodge could see the deadly little shard of darkness and the way it sucked at the light.

"This is the Dragon's Tooth," Cyrus said. "The Reaper's Blade. One of the most dangerous relics ever collected by the Order of Brendan. It can kill any transmortal, but whoever is holding it cannot be killed. Those black-bladed swords you have are what the Order calls tooth-forged steel. They were made with this tooth and, when it is nearby, those swords draw on the tooth's power. This tooth is how I killed Baldwin, and it's why your arrows didn't kill me. Since it is the only thing anyone knows of that can kill the dragons, they want it very badly. As does at least one other pretty awful person who goes by Phoenix." Cyrus snapped the knob shut and tucked the bamboo hilt back into his waist band.

"Well spoken," Hanno said. "This, we knew. You have not lied."

"You said all my truth," Cyrus added. Reaching up to his throat, Cyrus slid Patricia's tail out of her mouth. As her silver light appeared, a gasp raced through the lodge and floorboards popped and groaned as every member of the crowd shifted for a better angle.

With his thumb in Patricia's mouth, Cyrus slid the keys off her tail and held them flat on his palm.

"This is Patricia," Cyrus said. "And these are called Solomon Keys."

Hanno's eyes widened, focused on the keys. The glowing silver snake hardly received a glance. "These keys open any lock, but Rupert Greeves told me that they destroy their holder if they are used for theft. William Skelton gave them to me before he died. There, that's it. Now you know all my secrets, and I really need to get away from this fire before I cook."

"The flames do their work," Hanno said. He stared at the keyring in Cyrus's hand. "You know the keys by name but not by origin?" he asked. "They were in this valley for millennia, but stolen centuries ago. Do you not know what else you carry on that ring? Or do you think we will overlook them?"

Cyrus slid as far forward as he could on his low stone block and leaned away from the fire over his knees toward his uncle. He was past caring how weak he did or did not look to the crowd. The heat was too much.

"What do you mean?" Cyrus asked, looking down at the two keys and three charms on his keyring. Thanks to all the jungle moisture, the keys were in their original form. The long gold key had an empty triangle at it one end, a square in the middle, and a circle at the other end. Smooth teeth lined the shaft on all sides. The silver key was bent like a corkscrewing crescent moon with something like Arabic etched on the sides. Next to the keys, there was a hinged silver sheath shaped like a shark tooth, a large pearl set in the grip of a silver claw, and a piece of reddish wood, polished smooth.

"The other charms," Cyrus said. "I don't know much. That silver triangle used to hold the Dragon's Tooth before Phoenix ripped it out and put it in the head of his cane. The pearl and the wood might be worth something, but I don't really know."

"A tidal pearl," Hanno said. "And wood from the tree of truth. They and the keys will remain in this valley when you leave."

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Cyrus slid the keyring back over Patricia's head and let her cool body slither tight around his neck. A moment later, her silver light vanished, and a whisper rippled through the crowded lodge.

"You're my uncle," Cyrus said. "And you're threatening to rob me?"

"It would not be robbery," Hanno said. "It would be restoration. Those keys were given, in a way. The others were taken. Stand up."

Cyrus lurched forward and eased himself vertical on stiff joints. His feet erupted in needle pricks as blood flowed down into his legs, but the agony was worth getting his back clear of the fire. Mercy jumped up beside him.

"No one follows us," Hanno said to Mercy. "My nephew must learn his fate alone." And then to the lodge in general, "Prepare food."

✵

Outside the lodge, the wet night air felt cool on Cyrus's sizzling skin. The rain was nothing more than fat, intermittent drops left behind to remind Cyrus of the smothering deluge that had drowned his afternoon and would drown his afternoon tomorrow just like it had every one of his afternoons for weeks.

The buildings in the village were all lit with long, slender-handled torches mounted on the exterior walls, leaning far enough out to keep the flames from the thatched rooves.

Jay pulled a torch off the lodge wall and handed it to Hanno. Up close, Cyrus could see that the torch handle was bronze and covered with jagged inscriptions worn smooth above and below his uncle's hand. Jay then tossed Cyrus his shirt and walked away into the darkness without a word. Cyrus slipped into the damp linen and began to work at the buttons.

"What do you want more than anything, sister son?" Hanno asked. The torch flame snapped at the wind above Hanno's head.

"I want to get back to Wisconsin," Cyrus said. "I want to end the dragons and the transmortals. I want to see my mom and my sister and my brother again. And I want to kill Phoenix. But that's more of a need than a want. Why? How about you?"

"I want rest for my people," Hanno said. "The rest of a task well and faithfully accomplished. Do you know of the ancient Ark of the Israelites?"

Cyrus blinked in surprise. "Yeah. I guess. The golden box?"

"It was the seat of the World-Father Himself, the locus of His holiness in this world for many long years." Holding his torch high, Hanno began to walk away. Cyrus gave up on his shirt buttons and hurried after his uncle across the soft ground, both to keep up with the light and to hear him. "Among all the tribes of men, one tribe—the line of Abraham—was given the light to protect until the time was right for the light to spill. And in that tribe, the sons of one tribe alone were given the duty of tending and guarding that 'golden box,' as you call it. Do you know why?"

"The Levites," Cyrus said, coming even with his uncle. "And I have no idea. The Jews had lots of rules like that."

Hanno's limping strides were not long, but they were quick, and his feet were steadier on the mud and the moss than Cyrus's were.

"They were given that task," Hanno said, "so that all the other tribes, and all the men and women in the world, would not be slain. They—that tribe within a tribe—stood as a veil between all-consuming light and the dim and damaged peoples of the earth. They were chosen for that honor until the King greater even than Solomon who built the temple and hung its veil should walk the earth in flesh. We, the Cataan, are another tribe such as the sons of Levi, but we do not veil light. We were chosen for dishonor, for distant service hidden in darkness. And, because all such things stand on their heads, to faithfully serve in such a role is a great honor indeed. We were chosen to stand between all the peoples of the world and destruction beyond human comprehension. The Levites guarded Earth from the holiness of Heaven. We stand as the veil between Earth and the horrors of Hell."

As the two passed the last human structure on the valley floor, Cyrus looked up. Most of the moon hung just above the canyon wall, spilling silver down hundreds of feet of waterfall into the swirling vapor the water became before it could reach the bottom.

"How do you know about the Jews?" Cyrus asked. It was far from the only thing he was wondering, but somehow, it had cut to the front of the line on his tongue. Hanno stopped, turned, and stared at Cyrus, torch light sputtering beside his creased face.

"You think we are fools, hidden away from learning, Cyrus Smith?" Hanno laughed and then continued limping toward the waterfall. "I was in my third year at Oxford when my brothers were slain, and I was called back to this valley," he said over his shoulder. "And we have our own libraries as well, libraries that would rewrite the world's history if we broke our oaths and revealed them. Wisdom and learning has been a requirement for every leader of our people since the very beginning." Hanno glanced back with a grin. "Since King Solomon first commissioned his temple…and this place."

"Wait," Cyrus said, jogging up beside his uncle for a better look at this face. "*The* King Solomon?"

As they reached the bottom of the waterfall, Hanno walked straight into the swirling cloud of vapor, vanishing in front of Cyrus as his torch hissed and shrank away. Cyrus ducked his head and followed, but ducking did nothing to stop the moisture from beading up on every centimeter of his exposed skin, running down his nose and pooling in his eyes and ears. Blinking, accelerating, and wiping his face with both hands, Cyrus emerged onto a slick stone floor in a small chamber with black rock walls completely covered with inscriptions. In the back of room, a thick stone door stood open. Hanno and his sputtering torch were already passing through it.

"Only Cataan, purified by fire, may pass through this door!" Hanno yelled as he disappeared. "All others will be cursed. Come!"

Cyrus stopped in the open doorway. He was going to ask if he had been purified, if that is what his time by the firepit in the lodge had really been about, but the chamber inside erased all questions from his mind, replacing them all with a cold tightening of his throat. It was more than his own fear. Patricia was pulling herself tight around his neck. She didn't like the room either.

Hanno had used his torch to ignite two large, bronze fire bowls that sat between four black columns more than fifty feet high. The columns supported a natural stone roof, crowded with carvings of massive horses and chariots, serpents and ships, fire and clouds and cities and mythical creatures—minotaurs and winged bulls, bearded kings with lion bodies and women riding wheels lined with eyes and fire. The sculptures were like nothing Cyrus had ever seen. In this room, even the towering angels on the rooves of Ashtown would look childish.

Finally lowering his eyes, Cyrus took in the walls. Black shelves more than twice his height stood on either side. The shelves were deep and filled with thousands of glass spheres, each the size of a grapefruit, each glinting like an eye almost outside the reach of a campfire at night.

Between the fire bowls, Hanno was studying a brown desk and two wooden office chairs that looked as out of place in the room as a bicycle would have. Or a computer.

Unaware that he was holding his breath, Cyrus crossed the threshold entered the enormous room. Patricia flinched and Cyrus loosened her with a finger. Hanno glanced up from the desk.

"Thus far, Baldwin came," Hanno said. "This was his office, where he did the work of the dragons…cataloging our captives."

"Was he Cataan?" Cyrus asked. "I thought you said that only—"

"He was cursed," Hanno said. "An unkillable boy fell out of the jungle into this valley and stripped life from William Baldwin, though he believed himself beyond death."

Turning in place, Cyrus made his way to his uncle and the desk.

Hanno sat down behind the desk, studying the clutter strewn across it—papers and pens, a microphone and recorder, three of the grapefruit-sized glass balls. Hanno gestured at the other chair without looking up at Cyrus. "Sit," he said. "And I will explain your task."

"Maybe explain this place first?" Cyrus asked. He sat in the wheeled office chair and jerked in surprise as it tipped and squealed him back into a steep incline.

"Brendan never saw this place," Hanno said. "But it was his inspiration for his Order, for your Ashtown. He read of Solomon's Gehenna, often called the Temple of Night, in scrolls that had survived the Romans but were later burned by helpful Vikings…or by us. Before the undying enemies of mankind and the World Father were ever Buried in Wisconsin, they were sent here, along with the fathers of our people."

"And all the glass balls?" Cyrus said, looking around at the shelved walls, glistening with thousands of giant shelved eyes. "What are they?"

"Do you know of the gin?" Hanno asked, picking a ball up off the desk and holding it out to Cyrus. "One third of the host of Heaven that was cast down to Earth. Dragons without flesh."

"Like Azazel," Cyrus said, taking the sphere carefully in his hands. "The blood dragon that possesses Radu Bey." The glass was heavy, blown, and the sphere was imperfect. On opposite sides, flattened glass seals had been stamped with sharp symbols.

Cyrus traced the symbols with a fingertip.

"The name of God on one end," Hanno said. "The name of the imprisoned on the other. King Solomon sealed every one of these spheres with his own hands. And you are right. Azazel was one such prisoner. Stolen from this place long ago, he now masters Radu Bey, the master of Baldwin, who, until you came, mastered us."

Horrified, Cyrus handed the sphere back to his uncle with both hands…slowly. Then he glanced back over the shelves and tried not to comprehend a world with thousands of Azazels out and about, choosing other mortals and transmortals to master. For Radu Bey to possess this place would be a much greater disaster even than opening the Burials of Ashtown.

"So," Cyrus said, swallowing and once again loosening Patricia's grip on his throat. "Solomon bottled lots and lots of dragons, and then he shipped them all here."

"He did," Hanno said. "After walking beneath the stars, he drew a map to this valley, a place he said was 'thin between the worlds', where his Gehenna could be built. He built ships and crewed them with Phoenicians. He then charged the last of his father's famous mighty men—the eleven still alive—to sail with the ships, oversee construction of this place to his designs, and establish a tribe in this valley to protect it until the end."

"So…the Cataan are Phoenician?" Cyrus asked. "Jewish?"

"Cataan is the name we took from a local tongue. It means *stones around a fire*. There were no women on those first ships," Hanno said. "But, even then, there was a tribe already in this valley where the young men found wives. And many other tribes married into the Cataan over the centuries. And, in the 1800s, the British indentured thousands of Indians to this coast. Some who fled into the jungles and found this valley were permitted to stay and marry. My great-grandmother was one such."

"So, this is all creepy and terrifying," Cyrus said, "and I'd like to go sit by that fire in the lodge again rather than stay in here, but I don't see how any of this has anything to do with my fate."

"This is the outer chamber," Hanno said. "Deeper inside, beyond living stone and dead waters, worse things roam loose. An escape was attempted, and the inner chambers were closed against it. These spheres, and every devouring gin now free in the world, are meant to be sealed deep beneath this stone, out of reach of every Baldwin and Azazel and Radu Bey. Instead, they sit here, protected only by a simple people, easily reached by any who do not fear a curse."

"What does that have to do with me?" Cyrus asked.

"While many have sought this place and found nothing, you came to us as if by chance, like one prophesied," Hanno said. "Our own blood descended on us, carrying the Reaper's Blade, Solomon's own keys, a tidal pearl, and wood of the truth tree—all that is needed to open the inner pits and descend into Solomon's Gehenna, banishing the gin and their spawn forever. The will of the World Father is clear. You have been sent for this purpose, perhaps born for it."

"No," Cyrus said. "Absolutely not. I don't see that as my role at all, and you really shouldn't read into us dropping in on accident. That doesn't mean anything about my fate or *purpose*…"

Hanno wasn't listening. He was staring over Cyrus's shoulder with hard eyes. Cyrus spun his chair around as five large transmortals entered the chamber—two very tall black-bearded twins, one clean shaven shorter man built like a bull with a long braid and a nose like an eagle's, and two women, both tall and whip thin, one with skin the color of rich soil, one egg-white pale, both with shorn heads and tattooed scalps.

"Mr. Smith," the dark-skinned woman said, smiling. "We are the *Ordo Draconis*. We have come to collect you."

Cyrus rocked slowly in his desk chair, squealing the springs loudly to release his tension. This wasn't good. Not good at all. But showing worry or panic wouldn't help, and it would hurt.

"Mr. Smith?" Cyrus asked. "Really? You dragons call me the Desolation. Or haven't you heard?"

Ignoring Cyrus, the bearded men split up, examining the shelves against the walls, while the women and the bullish man approached Cyrus.

Hanno rose slowly to his feet behind Cyrus. "I must warn you, to enter this place is to die. Exit while you can."

"I hear death is lovely," the bull man said. "I hope you don't mind that we burned your village. Hard to hear the screaming from in here. Can't even smell the smoke."

"Liar," Hanno answered. "You haven't had time."

"Haven't we?" the black woman asked.

Cyrus stood and reached across the desk behind him without taking his eyes off the transmortals. The bearded twins began clinking through the spheres on the shelves, trying to read the seals.

"Radu will rejoice," one of the twins said. "They have not been destroyed."

"Blade," Cyrus said to his uncle, and he felt the cold hilt of the machete placed in his hand—a tooth-forged machete that his own father had brought to this jungle before Cyrus had been born, on the same journey that had led Lawrence Smith to Cyrus's mother, a machete that had been waiting here for decades, waiting for the tooth to arrive, waiting for Cyrus.

Fear tingled up and down Cyrus's legs while adrenaline amplified his heart's drumming into thunder. In that moment, he knew that his uncle had been right.

Cyrus Smith was not lost in the jungle. He had careened through the correct portal and wandered through the rain right on schedule. He was standing in a moment that had required generations of preparation outside of his control. He was where he was supposed to be, a veil between darkness and the world of men.

Cyrus pointed the thick-bladed machete at the bull man.

"You first," he said. "Do you have a name? We like to keep the records tidy."

END OF CHAPTER 6 ✵

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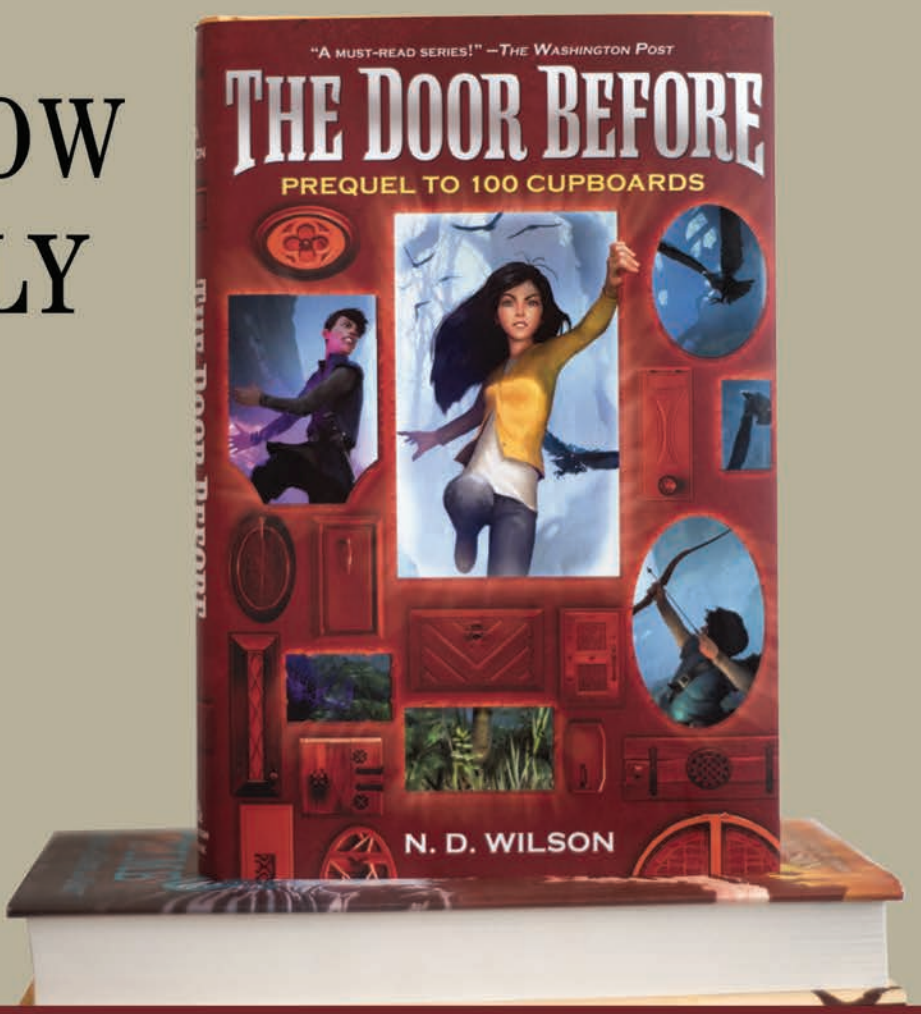

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THE FUNNIES

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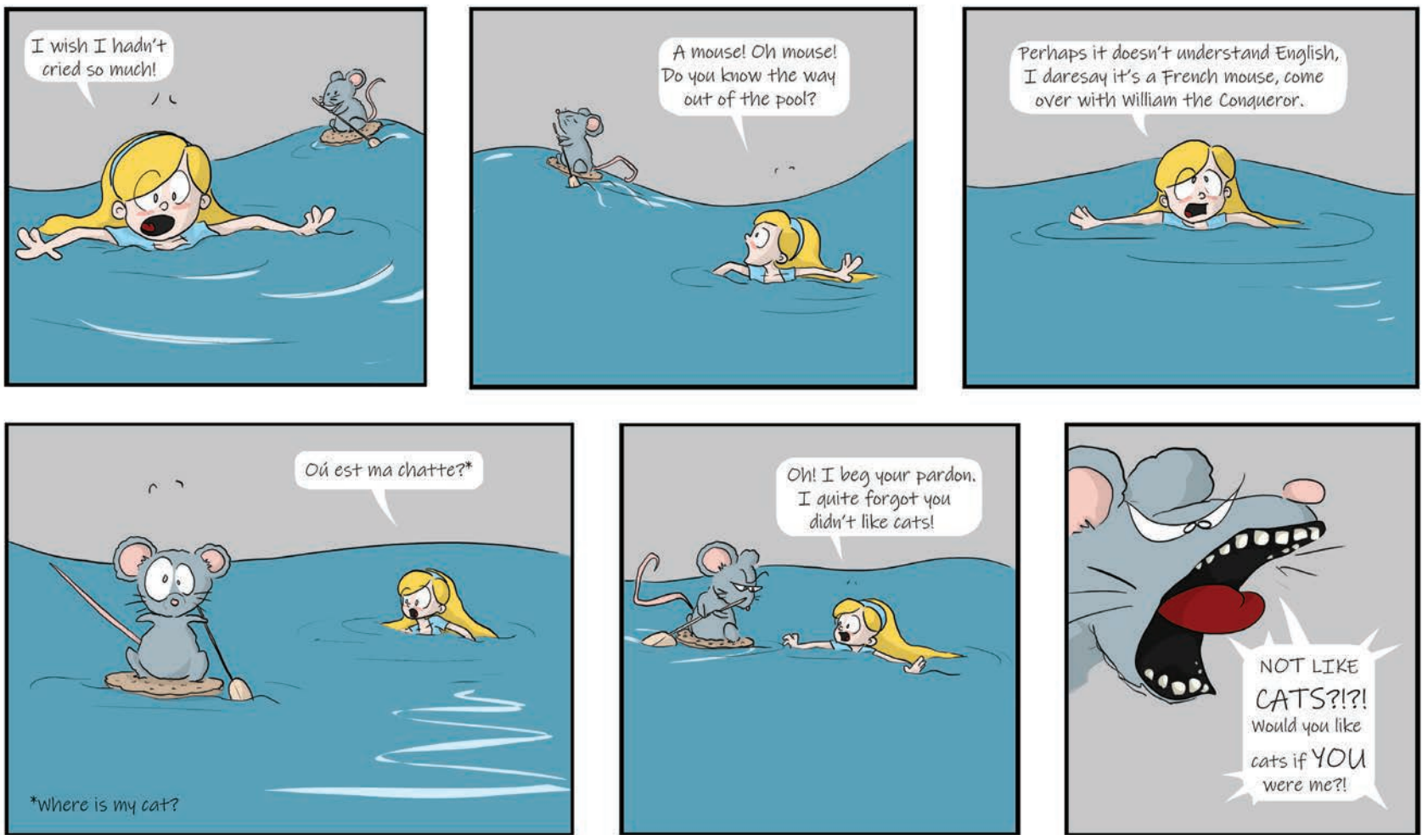
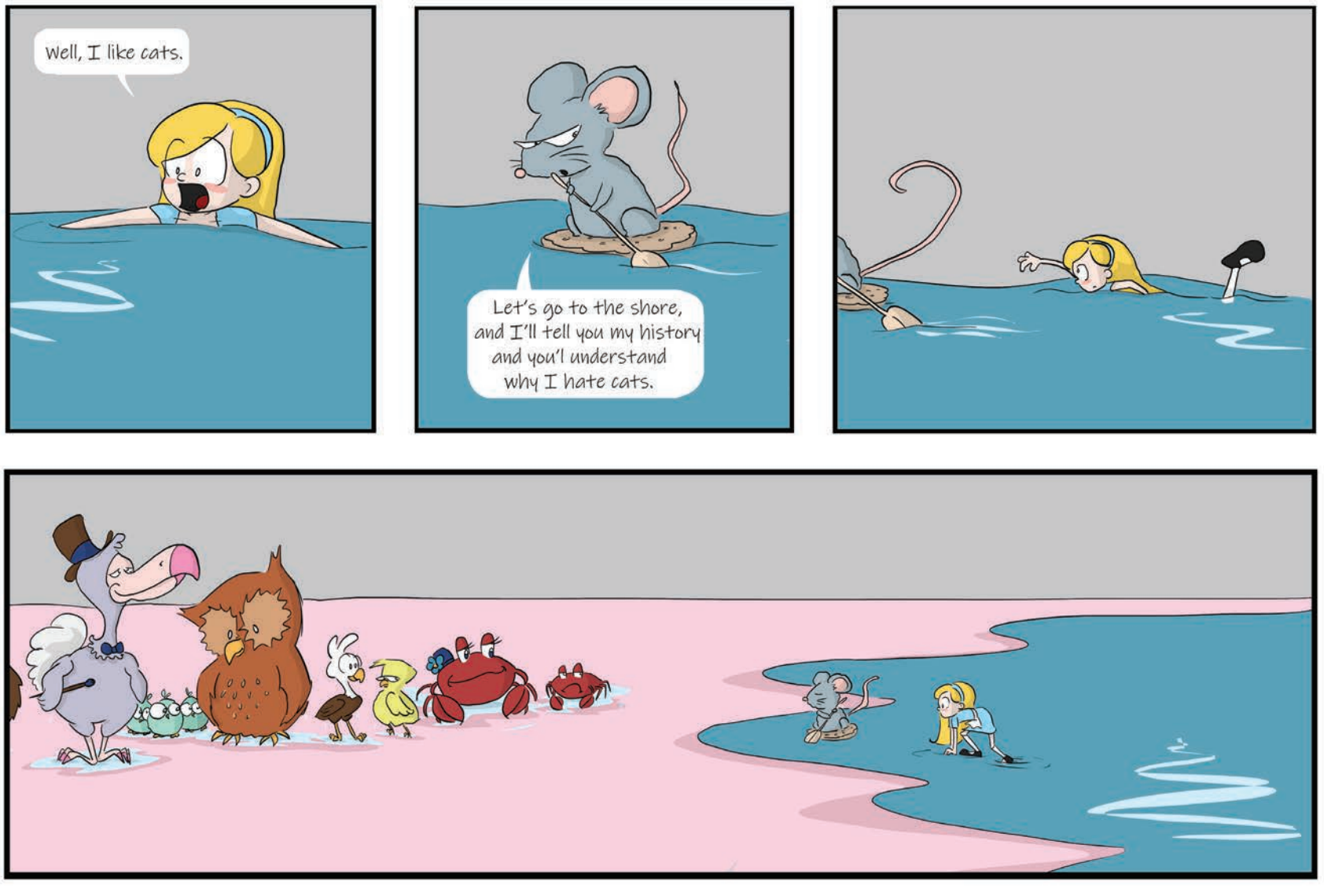

I wish I hadn't cried so much!
A mouse! Oh mouse! Do you know the way out of the pool?
Perhaps it doesn't understand English, I daresay it's a French mouse, come over with William the Conqueror.
Oú est ma chatte?*
*Where is my cat?
Oh! I beg your pardon. I quite forgot you didn't like cats!
NOT LIKE CATS?!?! Would you like cats if YOU were me?!



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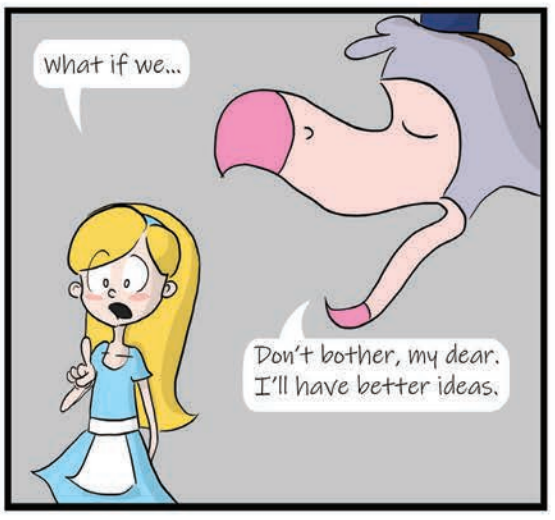
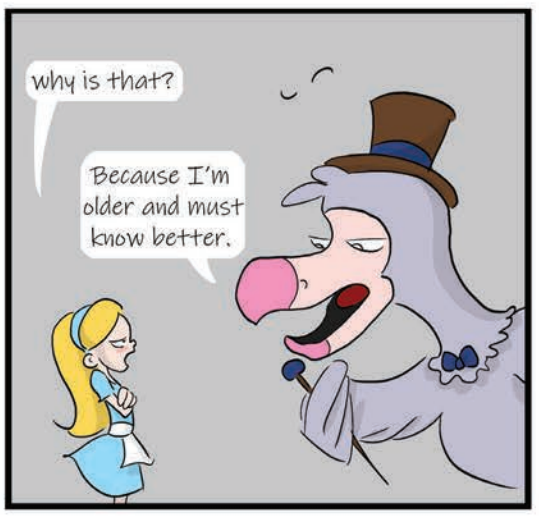
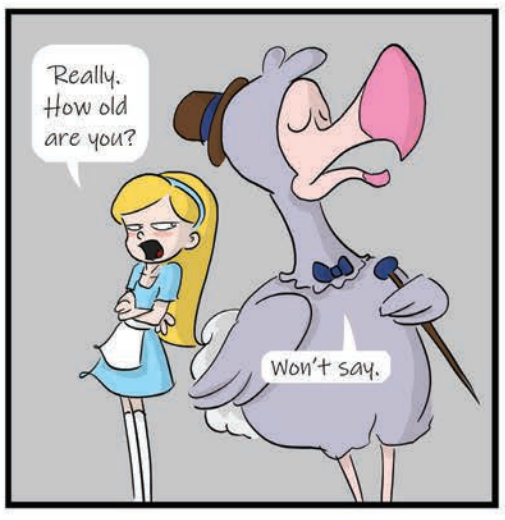
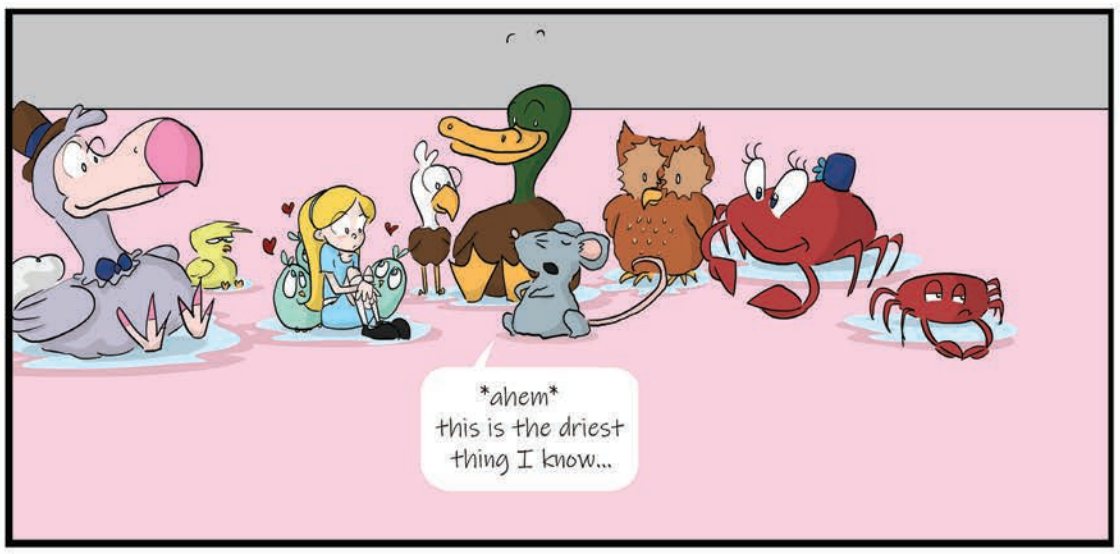
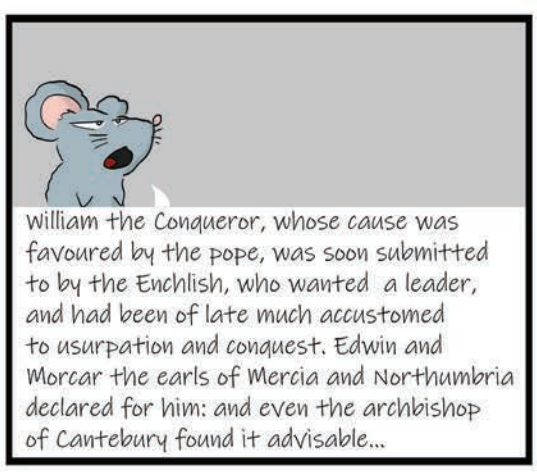
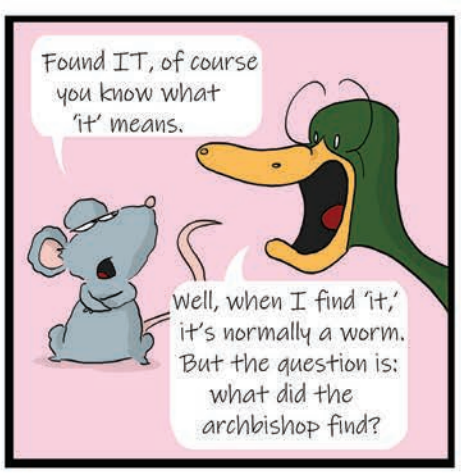









William the Conqueror, whose cause was favoured by the pope, was soon submitted to by the Enchlish, who wanted a leader, and had been of late much accustomed to usurpation and conquest. Edwin and Morcar the earls of Mercia and Northumbria declared for him: and even the archbishop of Cantebury found it advisable...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CHAPTER 6

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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7

GEHENNA

"Hold on," Cyrus said, pointing his fat-bladed black machete around the room. "Are any of you famous?"

The black-bearded twins looked back at Cyrus from the shelves on opposite walls. They both wore knee-high boots and long, brass-buttoned coats. Both held black, glass orbs in oversized, hairy hands.

The shorter bull man with the beak nose cocked his head. Behind him, the tall, bare-armed women glanced at each other and began to move forward, spiny, alligator-skin trousers squeaking as they did.

Cyrus backed around the desk until he was beside his uncle Hanno, close enough to feel heat coming off of him in the cool cavern.

"Cyrus…" Hanno said.

"I mean, why *you guys*?" Cyrus asked. "Are any of you famous at all? Have I heard of you? Has anyone anywhere heard of you?"

"I'm not sure I understand the question," the bull man said. He popped his neck to the right and then the left. The noise crunched an echo in the stone cavern that should have been intimidating, but all Cyrus noticed was how the man's thick braid bobbed and swung behind him when he did it.

"Think about it," Cyrus said. "Radu Bey picks five transmortals to get me… and he sends five throwaways. None of you have announced your names, your legends. Nothing. In my experience, transmortals are always trying to prove what huge deals they are. You're disposable, aren't you? Radu Bey doesn't even expect you to survive this. Did you know he ran from me? Even in his dragon form. Now he's testing me. That's all. I'll pass the test, and none of you will be leaving this place."

The clean-shaven bull with the bobbing braid stepped forward. The right side of his mouth twitched up with the tiniest ghost of amusement.

"You are more than a little mistaken, Smithling. Allow me to make some introductions," he said. "Those matching gentlemen at the shelves are both Edward Teach."

"See," Cyrus said to Hanno. "Nobodies. Hold on. Both?"

"Both. Known in mortal life as Blackbeard," the man continued. "There were once as many as nine of them."

Cyrus looked from one black-bearded giant to the other. Both men smiled and touched their foreheads in lazy salutes. *Blackbeard? The pirate Blackbeard?* He didn't know much about the man, but what he did know was not encouraging. Not at all.

Cyrus tried to suppress a swallow. The last thing he needed was for these monsters to see his Adam's apple bob.

Oops.

There it went. Cyrus had swallowed. And the bull man had noticed for sure. His smirk expanded and his eyes sparkled on either side of his beak nose.

"The ladies here have been known by several names. The pale flower was first Erzebeth Bathory, Countess de Ecsed, a devotee of the Dracul since childhood, and the first woman to ever bond herself to the Ordo Draconis by blood sacrifice."

Cyrus couldn't help but assess the pale woman with the shaved head and the translucent skin. Her scalp had been tattooed with a single, giant, clawed hand, gripping her from above, and her teeth had been filed into points. Even if he hadn't been meeting her in a dark cave, the look would have given him chills. He didn't think he's seen teeth like that since his very first introduction to a transmortal—Maxi Robespierre.

My first transmortal kill, he reminded himself. Erzebeth could flash her spooky smile at him all she liked. He had a sharp tooth of his own that could erase her completely. He hoped.

"I get it," Cyrus said. "Fine. Matching Blackbeards and an old Dracula family friend. Not disposables."

"Dracul sister," Erzebeth snarled. "Smith-spawn! Vlad called me his sister before your Captain took his head."

"Why do we listen to this?" Hanno whispered beside Cyrus.

"The darker flower," the bull man said, "is Queen Ranavalona, who traded her throne for deathless service to the Ordo Draconis."

Cyrus flexed his now sweaty fingers on the hilt of his machete. The weight was familiar, but not the length. He was more used to long blades, and now that the introductions were almost over, it would be hard to put the fight off much longer. Verbal sparring hadn't gotten him any closer to a plan, and it had made his opponents more confident. Discouraging.

Or maybe an advantage.

The bull man grinned. "Are we sufficiently auspicious captors for the young Smithling?" he asked. "For the boy who styles himself *Desolation*?"

"I asked your name first," Cyrus said. "Like I said. We have records to keep. Are you fancy, too? Or just the butler for these four?"

"You may not know my mortal name," the man said. "It is long and Latin."

"Like your braid?" Cyrus asked. "You really should rethink that look, by the way. It shortens you. The queen and the countess have the right idea. Shave the hair. Add a classy claw tattoo on your scalp like theirs. Maybe file the teeth?"

"Marcus Junius," the man said. "Sometimes Quintus Servillius Caepio. But most famously known by one name only, thanks to the work

of that fool, Shakespeare."

"And that is?" Cyrus asked.

"Brutus," the man answered. "Humble caesar-slayer. In the flesh."

"Whoa," Cyrus said. Memories from History class in Wisconsin flickered through his mind. Or maybe it was Lit class. "You killed one of the, um, big Caesars?" Cyrus asked. "And did he really say, you know, the Latin thing?"

And then Brutus made a mistake.

"Et tu Brute?" he asked. "He said no such thing. He gurgled. But I am indeed the man who struck that mortal down."

Brutus clenched a fist over his heart and bent at the waist, leaning his thick torso forward, lowering his eyes to the floor. The bow wasn't deep, but it was enough.

The distance was too great for Cyrus to cross, but he didn't need to cross it. With one quick step—picturing Rupert's stump practice target at Ashtown—he whipped the heavy, black-bladed machete forward as hard as he could.

Quintus Servillius Caepio Brutus, for all his bloodthirsty fame and his centuries of life, was much softer than Rupert's stump target.

Cyrus had been aiming for the top of his head. Instead, the heavy blade grazed the man's jaw as it plunged into his bent torso just between his thick neck and his collarbone.

The weapon was entirely sheathed inside Brutus. The gold hilt perched, small and alone, on his shoulder.

The famous Roman traitor struggled to straighten, but he only managed to look up at Cyrus with startled eyes before collapsing in a limp heap, face down on the floor.

Erzebeth and Ranavalona were statues of surprise. The Blackbeards had all four of their eyebrows high. Cyrus slid to Brutus's body, jerked the machete free and jumped back to his feet, breathing hard.

One down.

"Tee-hee, Brutus," Cyrus said. "Feel free to gurgle."

Both Blackbeards burst out laughing in nearly perfect sync.

"Well thrown, lad!" they both bellowed. "Well thrown! But the Brute won't be pleased with you when he gets back up, oh, no he won't."

"What'll it be this time?" the pirates asked each other. "The Brute always has loved a flaying!"

"Aye! That he has," the pirates answered themselves. "The boy will be lucky to keep a pinkie toe unskinned now!"

"Silence," Erzebeth said, flexing long paper white fingers. "You idiots. The boy struck with Reaper steel. He holds the Reaper's blade."

The mirror-image pirates looked at each other.

"Meaning…" the Blackbeard on Cyrus's left said.

"…what exactly?" finished the Blackbeard to his right.

Ranavalona spoke with a slight lisp. "Meaning the mortal boy has blasphemed. He knows not his place!"

"Brutus is dead," Cyrus said. "Forever. He's gone. Dust to dust. And something tells me no one will miss him."

Erzebeth, tall and skeletal, swayed forward like a sapling in a storm. Her translucent skin looked creamy smooth next to her studded leather vest. Cyrus couldn't see a single freckle or mole or scar—

"We drink him," Ranavalona said. "Smith blood would do us good."

"We burn him," the Blackbeards said. "And then smash all these glass balls!"

Cyrus backed away with his blood-slicked machete raised.

"Before you do," he said, "would someone explain the Blackbeards, please?"

"Back when those two idiots were still just one man, they made a deal," Erzebeth said. "Not with *the* devil, but certainly a devil. A deal that would enable them to live forever and still sacrifice a body or two to the gallows as needed. One soul divided across nine bodies. Sadly, one intelligence divided as well."

"Not sadly," the Blackbeards said, pulling their jackets wide open. The men wore matching bandoliers of holsters across their broad chest. Nine black powder pistols tucked in each. "We've been clever before. It hurt. Simple is so much more fun!"

"And do you always have to speak at the same time?" Cyrus asked.

"No," said Blackbeard on the left.

"But it's less painful when we're near," said Blackbeard on the right.

"Different words ache like a skull-splitter," they said in unison. "Is the Brute really dead? He won't come back?"

Cyrus turned to Hanno. "Where's the door?" he whispered. "The inner door?"

Hanno looked from the women to the pirates to Cyrus. "This is foolishness."

Cyrus smiled and pulled Patricia off his neck, dropping the keyring and the Solomon keys into his hand. "I'm sure it is. Do you know what's on the other side?"

"A wall of death water," Hanno said. "Guardians."

"You all can take me to Radu Bey in a bit, but who wants to see something epic first?" Cyrus asked loudly.

Hanno turned his back to the transmortals and approached the stone wall in the rear of the cavern. Cyrus followed.

The four transmortals hesitated, as predators often do when prey is suddenly calm or unafraid.

Hanno ran his palm over the natural stone just above head height, revealing a silver and gold panel. On it, two snail shells had been engraved, side by side, each surrounding a keyhole—one silver, one gold. Only, not snail shells. At least not the kind of snails Cyrus had ever seen. An intricate tangle of tentacles sprouted from each shell, and the keyholes were positioned like eyes between the tentacles and the shells.

Cyrus knew he'd seen pictures of animals like these before, but he had forgotten what they were called. Luckily, this wasn't a science test. He worked both keys off the keyring, slid the ring back onto Patricia and let her vanish around his wrist. After a brief moment of hesitation, Cyrus slid the gold key into the golden eye. Silver into silver.

Hanno backed away from Cyrus.

"What is this?" the Blackbeards asked.

"I do not believe this is wise," Ranavalona said. "Radu Bey said nothing of the inner chamber. Erzebeth, do not let him do this."

"Oh, come on," Cyrus said. "Don't you dragons want every Burial opened?"

Holding his breath, Cyrus turned both keys.

The stone wall did not open. No ancient gears began to grind. No hinges screamed. The cavern was nearly silent. Cyrus could hear small flames sucking at the air behind him. He could hear Hanno breathing.

"Lad," the Blackbeards said, "you have played this game long enough. It is time you came away with us."

"Wait," Cyrus said. "Look." The wall in front of him had begun to ripple like the surface of a still pond after receiving two small stones. Rings went out from around the keys, growing and building until they hit the ceiling of the cavern, the floor, the walls.

"This should not be," Ranavalona said. "I know nothing good of this."

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"I know nothing of this at all," Erzebeth said.

The pale woman moved up next to Cyrus, studying the liquefying wall. After a few moments, the entirety of the stone surface had become a wall of rippling dark water. The panel and keys floated gently in place, just above Cyrus's head.

"Never trust water that stands," the Blackbeards said. "Never. Ask Pharaoh's army. Or Atlantis. Or any sailor. When the sea stands, destruction follows."

"Hush," Erzebeth said. "What powers must be Buried behind such a spell?"

"There will be Great Ones behind this wall," Ranavalona said. "Creatures uncontained in spheres. Creatures we cannot expect to face or control. Erzebeth, let us take the boy and as many spheres as the plane can carry. Radu Bey can return to open this crypt himself if he chooses."

"What now?" Cyrus asked, glancing back at Hanno and then at Erzebeth. "Are we supposed to swim in? How do we open it?" Hanno was retreating toward the cavern exit. The transmortals did not appear to be paying him any mind at all.

Cyrus stretched out his hands to touch the surface, but the water retreated away from his fingertips.

"No!" Hanno yelled, and his sharp voice ricocheted off the walls. "Do not touch it."

Cyrus pulled his hand back, but Erzebeth had already seen the water retreat from him. Curious, she pressed her hand against the wall of water.

A shock of ripples raced away from her fingers in every direction, and the vertical liquid awoke with a deep glow behind it, like lava seen through one hundred feet of sea.

Erzebeth tried to jerk her hand back, but the water stretched inches away from the wall and then snapped her forward, swallowing her hand up to the wrist.

Two looming shapes, back-lit black, appeared in front of the distant magma glow.

Erzebeth saw them.

"Help me!" Erzebeth shouted. "Rana! Teach! Help me! Now!"

Cyrus stepped away from the pale woman as Ranavalona leapt forward grabbing Erzebeth's free hand with both of her own.

The pirates did not move to help.

The black shapes in the water were approaching fast—two enormous shells driven by bundles of tentacles.

"Teach!" Ranavalona screamed. "Now!"

The heels of the dark queen's boots skittered and scraped against the cavern floor as she pulled. With a lurch, Ranavalona slipped onto her back. The watery wall slurped Erzebeth in nearly to the elbow.

"Cut it off!" the Blackbeards shouted. "Loose the arm at the joint, or the beasties will have her whole!"

"Blade!" Ranavalona shouted at Cyrus. "Give me the Reaper blade!"

Cyrus didn't move. He couldn't take his eyes off the approaching armies of tentacles.

"Blade, lad!" the Blackbeards bellowed.

A heavy hand gripped Cyrus by the shoulder and spun him around. Without hesitation, Cyrus drove the already wet machete into the legendary pirate's stomach and up behind his ribs.

For a moment, the two stood, Cyrus eye level with spittle dripping off the end of the much taller man's greasy black beard.

"Un…kind," the pirate said, and he collapsed backward onto the stone floor.

Across the cavern, the other Blackbeard screamed in pain.

The two monstrous shapes had reached the surface—both looming behind the water like the shadows of twelve-foot snails perched on rippling beds of tentacles.

To Cyrus's ears, the cavern went silent. He saw Blackbeard gurgling at his feet and Ranavalona screaming and Erzebeth weeping and fighting, but he heard nothing. He saw two sharp tentacles emerge from the wall of water—neither with suckers. One tentacle wound itself tight around Erzebeth's waist while the other groped for Ranavalona's feet. The surviving Blackbeard leapt forward, bellowing as he fired two pistols into the tentacles.

The tentacles didn't even flinch in reaction to the pirate's bullets.

Ranavalona let go of Erzebeth and scrambled up and away from the tentacle tip at her own feet.

As the wall of water swallowed the pale woman whole, Hanno hit Ranavalona hard in the back, driving her toward the liquid. The second tentacle snatched Ranavalona's booted legs out from under her, slammed her down, and began reeling her feet first into the water while she clawed at the stone floor.

"You," Blackbeard snarled. "Boy. You die."

Cyrus turned to see twin pistols pointed at his chest.

The world went silent once more when the muzzles flashed. Cyrus felt the punch of both bullets in his chest and he flew backward, landing hard and sliding closer to the water.

Ow.

Ow. A lot of ow.

Cyrus had been shot before while holding the dragon's tooth. He knew it wouldn't kill him, but the pirate was using a heavier, slower, and more brutal round than Phoenix's men had in the battle at Ashtown. Cyrus couldn't breathe. He couldn't think. He was barely existing, barely aware of anything but the pain. It felt like he'd been impaled by two blunt shovel handles.

Cyrus watched his uncle jump on the pirate's back above him, and he saw the pirate throw Hanno to the ground and crack him over the head with a pistol barrel. Cyrus turned his head to the side, still gasping for air, just in time to see Ranavalona disappear, writhing and kicking, into the wall of water. It hardly seemed important.

And then Cyrus felt the pirate's huge hands grip him by the waistband and by the front of his shirt.

Cyrus was lifted high into the air above the pirate's head.

He knew what was coming next.

No.

Please, no.

Cyrus slapped at the big man for any kind of grip, but before he'd managed to take his first breath or snag a fist full of hair, Cyrus was flung, flipping, into the wall of dark water.

The water opened, retreated from Cyrus's flailing form, and then it slapped shut behind him. Pure and complete cold was all Cyrus felt. No splash. No wetness. Nothing to slow his fall.

Cyrus's bones jolted as he hit the stone floor with his back.

He was surrounded by water, but contained in a dry egg of air.

After a moment, in which he finally managed a breath, Cyrus struggled to sit up.

To Cyrus's left, a twelve-foot nautilus—he had remembered the name—was loudly swallowing the black queen whole. To his right, Erzebeth had already been consumed up to her boots.

Facing Cyrus from the other side of the water, Blackbeard stood, rippling and distorted, above the unconscious body of Hanno.

The pirate aimed two fresh pistols at Cyrus.

The reports were muffled. Neither bullet reached the egg of air.

Behind Blackbeard, more shapes entered the cavern. More transmortals.

Maybe they hadn't lied about destroying the village.

And then a boy. A boy Cyrus knew too well—Oliver Laughlin. Once the pale and lonely nephew of Phoenix, now the modified adolescent body Phoenix had chosen to permanently inhabit.

Oliver approached the water, shrugging Blackbeard's warning hand off his shoulder.

The two boys stood only feet apart, but in different worlds.

"Come out!" Oliver shouted. His voice was rounded and slurred by the water, but easily understood.

Cyrus took a step backward. The egg of air moved with him. Out there, the tooth would be taken from him, and he would die, along with everyone else. In here, he might die, but the tooth would die with him. Or, at least, it would be well out of reach, guarded by tentacled monsters.

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Oliver Laughlin possessed all the memories from Phoenix's long and demented life, and many memories of his own. Phoenix had known of this place. He had read of the inner depths of Solomon's Gehenna, hidden behind a veil of death water, unholy echo of the Holy of Holies in Solomon's Temple. But Phoenix had not believed that such depths could exist. Not in the way they had been described by the rabbis who had written of them. But the rabbis had been speaking the truth. Oliver was standing in front of a vertical veil of water, facing Cyrus Smith, who somehow stood unharmed, flanked by tentacled monsters who had just devoured a pair of transmortals.

"Come out!" Oliver shouted again. "Or we'll kill everyone and take all the spheres to Radu Bey!"

Cyrus's rippling form took a step backward, toward the distant fiery glow. Neither monstrous nautilus moved with him. Both still loomed near the surface.

Cyrus began to turn away.

"Fine!" Oliver yelled, and he reached up for the two Solomon keys, floating on the surface of the wall above his head. Let Cyrus feel what it was like to be sealed in stone.

Before Oliver could touch the keys, two tentacles exploded out of the surface like a pair of clubs, slamming into Oliver like a boy-shaped pinata.

Oliver tumbled across the cavern, spilling fire bowls before slamming into a shelf of glass spheres against the wall.

Hundreds of spheres fell as the shelves collapsed around Oliver. The glass orbs bounced and clattered like beads, like marbles poured from a sack, cracking and colliding in a chaotic herd across the stone floor.

One hundred and eighty tentacles groped into the cavern, collecting every glass sphere they touched, and then reeling them back through the veil of water out of reach.

"No!" Oliver shouted from the rubble. "Stop them!"

Between the two busy monsters, below the floating panel with the keys, there was no sign of Cyrus.

The Smith was gone.

It was hard for Antigone to focus on what Rupert was saying. Silas Livingstone was sitting on the floor between Nolan's limp body and his still unconscious brother, George. Antigone wanted to go give Silas a hug, but she knew he wouldn't appreciate it. At least not officially. His father had bought them all enough time to reach this chamber, and he had bought that time with his life. Right now, it felt like a terrible purchase. How could it not?

The rest of the group was packed in tight around a long table in the center of an octagon lined with cupboards and cabinets and door jambs and stacks of picture frames. There was one sarcophagus in the corner, but there were no exits of any kind. This wasn't an escape. It was a tomb. How long could a collapsed tunnel and a single door hold out against transmortals? Against dragons?

Antigone was wedged in between Wiglaf and Big Ben Sterling at the table, which made cranking around to look at Nolan and the Livingstones a bit uncomfortable. Across from her, the Boones flanked Niffy.

"Antigone," Rupert said from the head of the table. "Are you listening?"

Antigone jolted. The big man sighed. The three sputtering light bulbs above Rupe threw deep shadows from his brows, down his already dark face.

"Sorry," Antigone said. "I was thinking about Alan."

Rupert nodded. "We all owe him our lives right now. He gave us this chance. This road was once forbidden, and it will not be easy. But it is possible. Staying here would just be staying in the grave."

"In times of war," Niffy said. "It can be unlawful to leave laws of peace unbroken. But there are limits to such things."

"I'm sorry, Niff," Diana Boone said. "That makes no sense to me. Rupe, you're saying the O of B once cultivated…doorways?"

"Only briefly," Rupert said. "The chaos that ensued resulted in their complete ban. For centuries. Like many other dark charms and relics of supernatural meddling, doorways were simply collected and destroyed in the Estates. Or contained. Here. In this room, built for that purpose."

Niffy looked up and around at the room's octagonal design. "Iron and stone," he said. "Too deep for tree roots. The Room of Forbidden Ways is uninviting to such pathways."

"And that was the point," Rupert said. "But when I was young, when Robert Boone was Avengel, something happened in this place that required it to be permanently sealed."

Every eye around the table was on Rupert, waiting for more while the light bulbs hummed above him.

"And?" Jeb asked. "What was it the happened?"

"The Smiths happened. As they so often have," Rupert Greeves said. "Hyacinth Smith. Your aunt, Tigs. Lawrence's secret sister."

"Secret sister?" Antigone asked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, your grandparents kept her a secret from the O of B. She had gifts that were forbidden by the Sages. They would have been forced to dispose of her somehow. But while Robert Boone was interviewing your grandparents in this very room, Hyacinth opened one of these doorways and entered Ashtown directly from California, with her little brother, your young father."

Antigone looked around the walls at the stacks of picture frames and cabinets and then back at Rupert. "What happened?"

"Well," Rupert said. "Realizing deep stone and iron offered no real protection against such travel, the Order couldn't take the risk of more hostile entries. This room was sealed and forbidden."

"No," Antigone said, "to my aunt. What happened to my aunt?"

"Oh," Rupert said. "She was sent to live elsewhere. Out of sight. Out of reach for the most part."

"Elsewhere? Like Florida? What do you mean, elsewhere? Does my mom know about this?"

"Tigs," Rupert said. "I really don't know. I was young. Robert was particular in his enforcements in those day. The Sages more so. And I don't know what Lawrence told your mother."

"So," Niffy said. "To put a needle in it, Rupert Greeves, Avengel of the Order of Brendan, wants us to break the charters, defy the ancient laws, and chant and dance to open faerie gates like a pack of heathens? I'd rather face the dragons alone in nothing but my underskins." Niffy spat on the floor for emphasis. "And," the young monk added, his voice climbing higher than his tufted hair. "What's to stop the dragons from following us through once they've cleared the tunnel and broken down the door?"

"That part is easy," Rupert said. "Set your mind to it, Boniface."

Jeb cleared his throat. Antigone looked at him. He was going to imitate Niffy's spitting, or he just wanted to say something.

"We burn the room behind us," Jeb said. "Along with the door." Rupert smiled and pointed at the lanky, freckled Boone.

"Exactly," Rupe said.

"Which," Big Ben Sterling said, "would require every one of us here to participate in such an exit, or remain behind and burn alive. Am I missing some key detail?"

Rupert didn't have time to answer. Niffy beat his heavy hands on the table for attention.

"And if we find ourselves in some faerie blight, we return to this earthly plane how?" Niffy asked. "I know the stories. I know why the doorways are forbidden." He waved at the empty frames that lined the room. "There are souls been wandering lost for centuries through gates such as these and like. Brother Boniface Brosnan will not be faerie prey or faerie play. No, thank you."

"You Irish," Jeb laughed. "Did Rupe said anything about faeries?"

Antigone felt Wiglaf inhale long and slow beside her. His form grew. Even the temperature in the room seemed to change with his breathing. Niffy went silent, leaving Jeb's derision unanswered.

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"Yes?" Rupert asked. "Wiglaf?"

Wiglaf rapped heavy knuckles on the table. His voice, when it came, was smooth and calm, but charged with concern, like a black cloud that has not yet spilled its thunder.

"Have any of you set foot on such paths?" Wiglaf asked. "Do you know their traps or their abuses? Do you know how such doorways come to be?"

"Cyrus went through one," Antigone said. "Chasing Radu Bey, right?" She looked at Niffy. "You said the dragons opened a doorway into Ashtown with a sacrifice of souls."

Niffy nodded.

"I have walked one such," Rupert said. "Some time ago. Hunting unholy creatures from another world. I did not go far."

Wiglaf scratched his beard and nodded.

"I have wandered far," he said. "And long. Between times and into the darkness beyond times. The risks in such journeys can be heavier than living and dying."

"I'm sorry," Diana said. "I am. But does anyone really see another choice? We're stuck in here like caramel in the center of a chocolate, waiting for the Ordo Draconis to chew through the rubble outside. If we don't run out of air or water or food first. It seems to me that the only question is if one of these doorways still works. And if more than one works, we flip a coin, head off, and torch the room behind us. Sure, we might die. But if we stay here, we're dying for sure and Alan's sacrifice was for absolutely nothing. We owe it to him to roll the dice and get on with it. So can we please stop talking and be on our way?"

Antigone tried to give Diana a supportive smile, but Diana did not smile back. She and her family had been close with the Livingstones for most of her life. She would miss Alan more than Antigone knew.

"I'll take that as a motion," Rupert said.

As if on cue, the stone walls shook, and the iron door rattled on its hinges. The dragons were at work.

"And I'll take that as a second," Rupert said.

"Are we really voting?" Jeb asked.

"No," Rupert answered. "We're leaving. Anyone unwilling can stay behind and smash the doorway behind us. Otherwise…fire."

"Motion carries," Sterling said.

"Spread out," Rupert said. "Check every door and picture frame and cabinet. And pray."

"For what, exactly?" Sterling asked.

"Faeries," Niffy said, "witches and succubae, imps and devils, brownies and sprites, so that we might kiss their ringed toes and beg a favor."

"Irish," Rupert said. "Disagree if you like. But behave."

THE DISCUSSION HAD HELD ANTIGONE'S ATTENTION. THE SEARCH WAS stressful, thanks to the occasional rattling of the stone walls and the rain of gravel from the ceiling, but also monotonous. Like everyone else, she flipped through stacks of picture frames, looking for any sign of weirdness, but finding none. The mostly raw wood often had strange burn scars, but that meant nothing to her.

After her second stack of frames, she stopped, knelt on the stone floor, and watched Wiglaf work.

The young but ancient Swede with the butter-colored beard was checking his frames quite differently than she had been checking hers.

First, Wiglaf smelled every part of the wood with his eyes closed. Then, he raised his head and sniffed at the ceiling of the stuffy room before immediately sniffing at the empty center of a picture frame or door jam. Finally, still with his eyes closed, he reached through the frame and hooked his thick arm back over the top of the frame to feel his face with his fingertips.

Antigone wasn't the only one who had stopped to watch the strange ritual. Diana dropped onto her knees beside Antigone.

"I guess I was doing it wrong?" Diana said quietly.

Antigone smiled. "I guess," she said. "Do we start over?"

"Here," Diana said, handing Antigone one of the discarded picture frames less than two feet across. "Give it a good sniff."

If the floor hadn't shaken beneath her, Antigone would have laughed. Still, when the shaking had passed, she held the sides of the frame in both hands, closed her eyes, and sniffed toward the ceiling.

Warm dust. Sweat. Smoke. Second-hand breath. Mold.

Then she plunged her face into the center of the frame and sniffed a second time.

Cold earth. Sharp, clean air. Cedar.

What?

And it wasn't just the smell. Antigone could hear the ocean, and the popping and groaning of ship timbers. No, not the ocean. Wind. Wind working its way through enormous swaying trees.

"Tigs?" Diana asked.

"Shhh," Antigone said, and she leaned further forward, trying to smell, but also trying to hold her breath and listen.

And then she fell.

One moment she was on her knees on a stone floor, deep beneath Ashtown. The next moment, gravity had shifted, her face slapped into mud, her mouth was full of pine needles, and she was sliding, rolling, and skidding down a wet bank.

With a sound like her own quick *Shhh*, Antigone Smith landed on her back in the soft slush of a melting snowdrift.

Above her, a cedar tree, bigger and broader than any redwood she had ever seen in California, was combing a strong wind with its canopy.

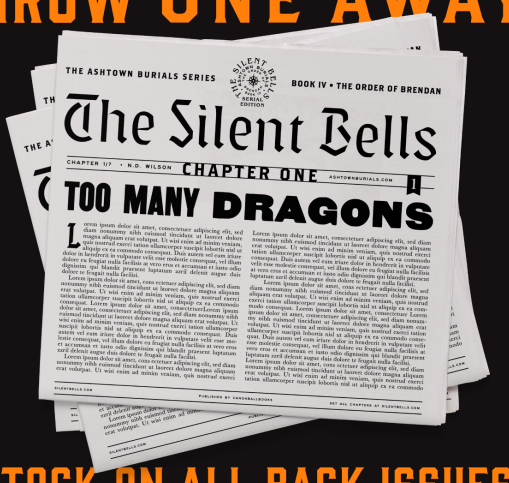
In the Room of Forbidden Ways, Diana's mouth hung open. An empty picture frame lay on the stone floor in front of her knees.

"Rupe!" Diana shouted. "Rupe! Antigone's gone! Something sucked her through one!"

END OF CHAPTER 7

DID SOMETHING EAT
ONE OF YOUR ISSUES?

ACCIDENTALLY
THROW ONE AWAY?



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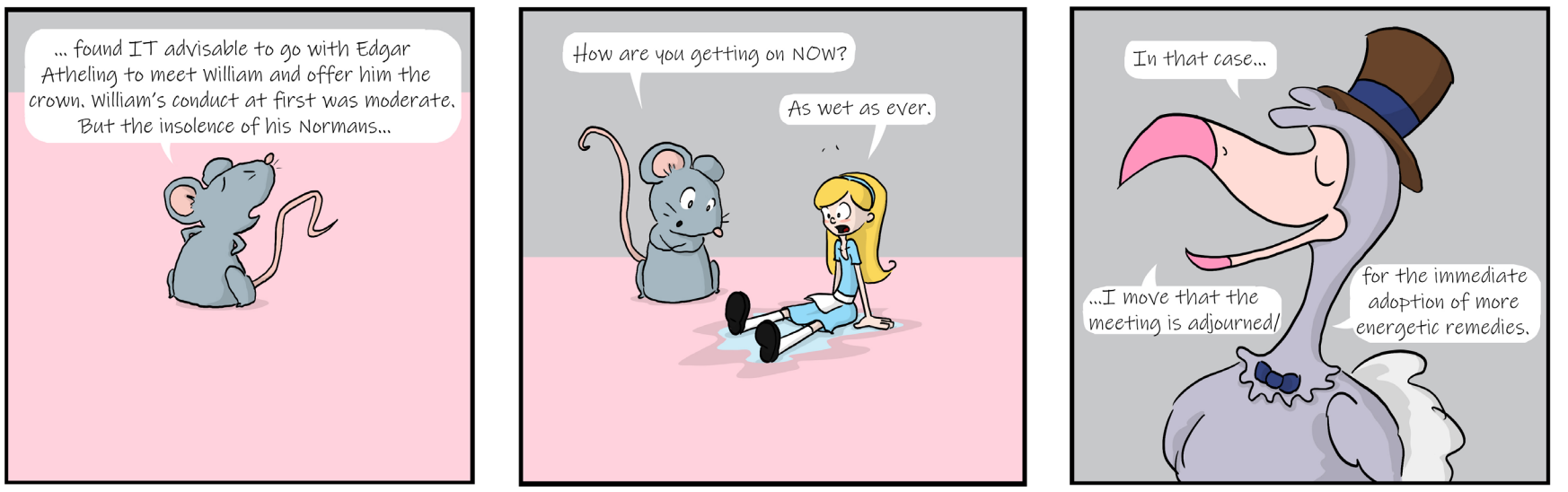
THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN


... found IT advisable to go with Edgar Atheling to meet William and offer him the crown. William's conduct at first was moderate. But the insolence of his Normans...
How are you getting on NOW?
As wet as ever.
In that case...
...I move that the meeting is adjourned!
for the immediate adoption of more energetic remedies.
SPEAK ENGLISH!
I don't know the meaning of half those long words and I don't believe you do either!
What I was GOING to say, is that the best thing to get us dry would be a Caucus-race.
What's a Caucus-race?
Essentially, run when I say 'go.'
on your marks...
GO!

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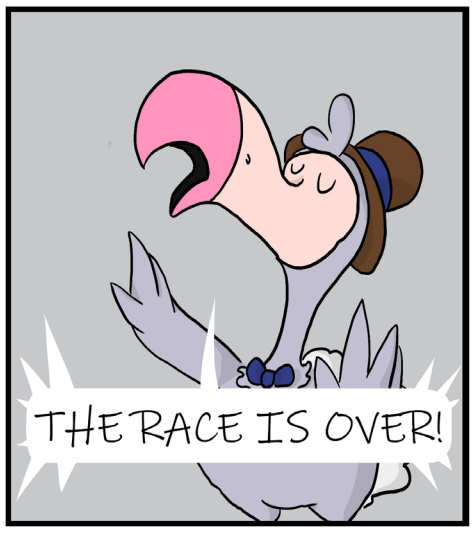

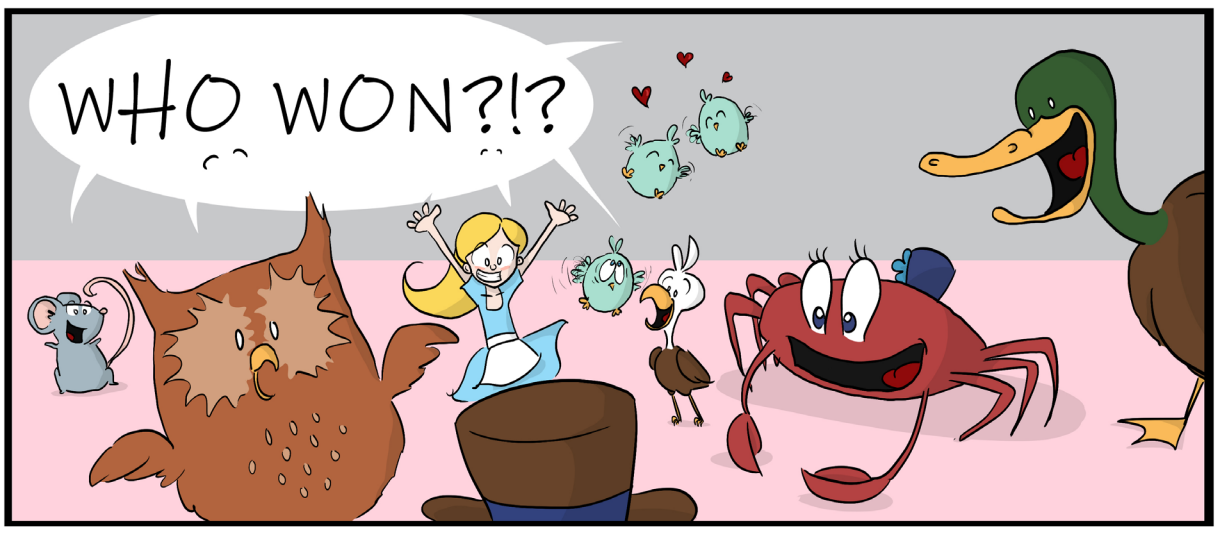

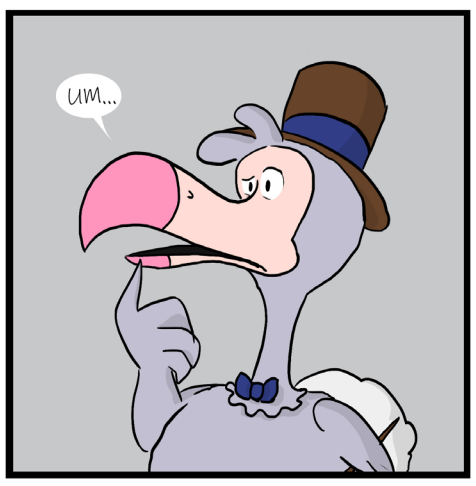

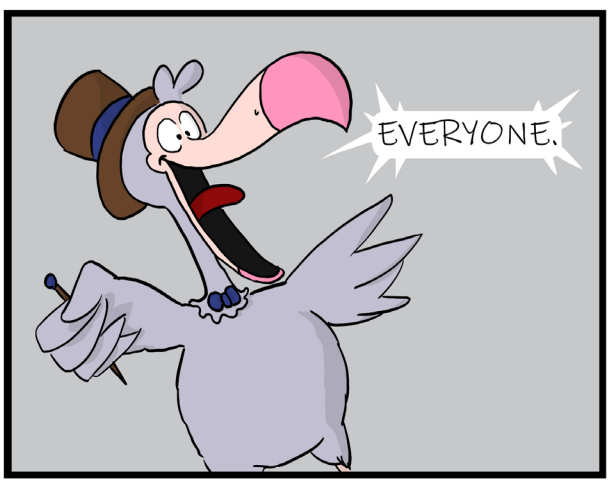

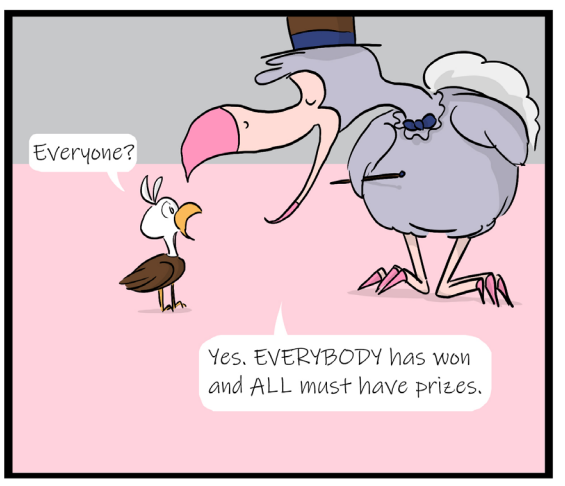

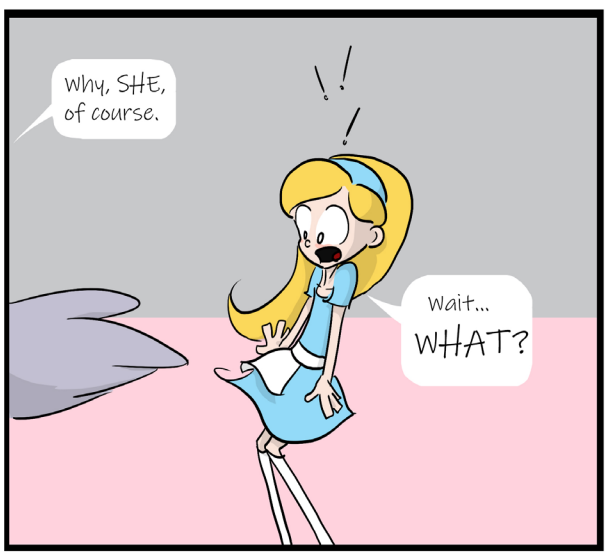

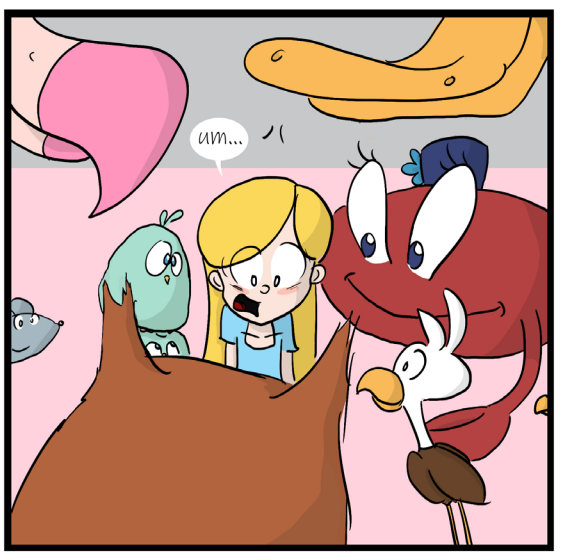

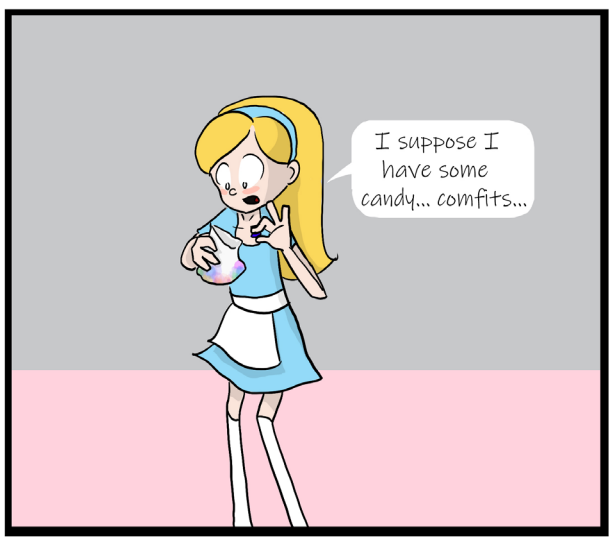

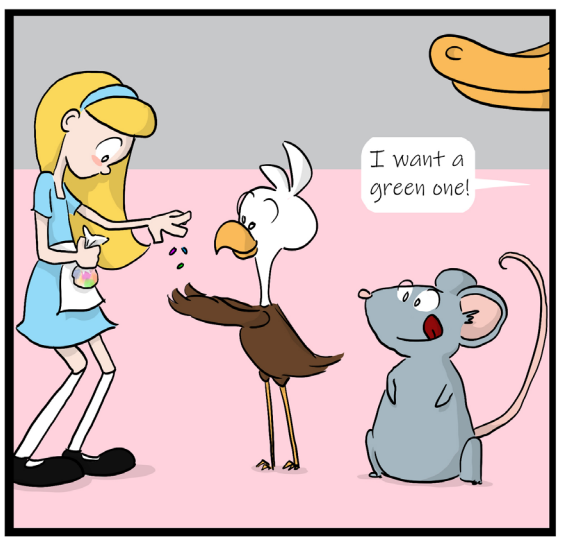

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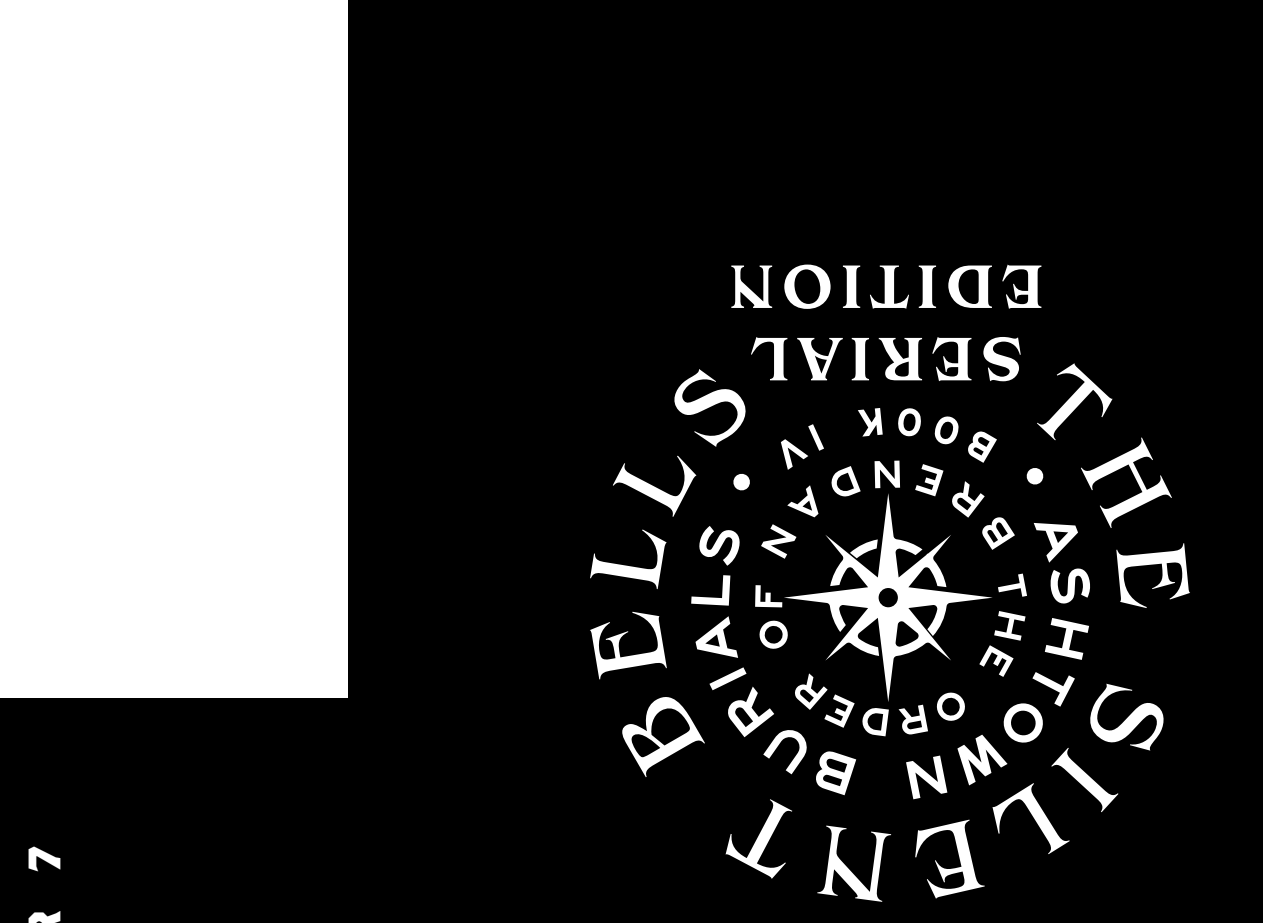

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CHAPTER EIGHT

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8

THE WIND LONG GONE

Daniel Smith had given up wiping the sweat off his face. Instead, he let it rain down on his arms and legs where he sat. His mother refused to trust the recent darkness of his skin, and she had forced him into several greasy layers of banana coconut sunscreen before letting him perch in the anti-aircraft gun bubble that Lemon Chauncey had led him to in the ship's stern. With all the sunscreen combining with his own sweat, Daniel felt as slick as a slug, leaving a shiny trail on anything he touched. The gray vinyl seat in the little, egg-shaped anti-aircraft gun was now swampy. The armrests looked like two oil slicks, and the gun's twin handles, both wrapped with hot pink tennis-racket grip, oozed when he squeezed them.

The sea breeze, normally a relief from the heat on this boat, was completely absent. It had died shortly after Lemon had shot the frigate bird. Daniel understood why sailors were superstitious. The two deaths—bird and breeze—couldn't be connected, but with one happening right after the other, they sure felt connected. And now Dan was stuck, dripping in the sun, watching the empty sky through old aviator glasses and a pair of battered binoculars.

Not for the first time, Dan was grateful for the modification in vision that Phoenix had given him.

Enemies were coming, Lemon had said. She had promised. The frigate bird had found the boat, but others had been looking out of its eyes. They would be following sooner than later.

Daniel had felt something in the bird's eyes himself, but not enough to understand. As crazy as Lemon Chauncey, outlaw Sage of the Order of Brendan, was, Dan would not have believed her if Pythia had not confirmed it.

The small oracle had given Daniel words as well as a burning leaf.

"Phoenix," Pythia had said, "sends his Reborn."

Soon, the fire on the leaf had read.

That was yesterday. Dan had barely slept since. Today's sun would set into the sea in an hour, but that was not soon enough for Dan and his stickiness. As someone who hated the artificial scents of both banana and coconut, Daniel was, for his very first time on the boat, almost grateful that all three orangutans were nearby and upwind. Their stench, even in breezy ghost traces, immediately erased the very concepts of banana and coconut from Daniel's mind, replacing them with the most complex aromatic riddle he had ever encountered.

Jerome was the closest, with his enormous, leather moon face, his saggy sausage lip, and his curtains of long, orange hair. Jerome was braving direct sunlight to stay close to Dan. Cadders and Jane were nearby as well, huddled in the shade of a lifeboat. All three apes were constantly sniffing.

"Banana and coconut sunscreen," Daniel said out loud. "What could possibly be more interesting? I'm sorry. The smell is such a lie. No bananas. No coconuts. Just me. I promise, I'd give them to you if I had any."

The apes didn't budge. Jerome fingered his lower lip, tugged at his orange goatee, and then sniffed a loud refutation at Daniel. Cadders and Jane rocked in place in their shady spot.

With his eyes on the clear sky, Daniel flared his greasy nostrils and sniffed back at the apes like a connoisseur of aromas.

"A pit toilet in a national park in August," Daniel said. "Twin drowned skunks left to bake in the sun on a bed of dead mussels. Moldy eggs strained through the lobby carpet of the Archer Motel after a big rain."

Dan glanced at Jerome. "You should be proud. Only one smell is truly worse." He smiled. "That's right. Three layers of banana coconut sunscreen and my sweat."

Jerome suddenly straightened and looked up, his long, orange hair swinging along his ribs.

"Oooo," he grunted. Looking at Daniel, the ape tapped his right ear and then knuckle-loped to the shade of the lifeboat, forcing Cadders and Jane to make room where there was not any.

Daniel looked up.

Nothing.

He shut his eyes and listened.

A fan motor running below decks. The sound of his mother's laughter, trickling up two decks from an open window. She was probably cooking and refusing to worry.

An engine. Faint. High. Distant.

Daniel looked up, scanning the empty sky for any movement. A tiny black V was sliding through the blue, approaching high noon in the sky. Raising his binoculars, Daniel found the plane quickly. It was large and slow and giving birth to a flock of small, black, one-man fliers. Dan counted nine swooping into a circular descent toward the ship, like a kettle of vultures.

Daniel let his binoculars drop down around his neck and put on his headset, flipping the switch on the side. This was happening. It was really happening.

"Incoming," Daniel said, and he heard his voice rattle over the ship's PA system. "Multiple, um, bogies incoming."

Cranking back the lever Lemon had showed him to chamber the big gun's first round, he gripped the oozy, hot pink pistol grips and tapped the trigger with a nervous finger.

Shivering, Antigone scrambled to her feet in the drift of melting slush that had cushioned her landing. She sank where she stood until the remaining wet shards of winter were pressing against her calves above her low boots, soaking through the sides of her loose safari pants. Even then, she did not move. Her eyes, and her mind, were focused on what had just happened, and on her surroundings.

Antigone was in a dim, mossy grove of cedar giants, standing on the threshold of an ancient, arched stone bridge that straddled a deep fern and moss lined canyon. Thirty or forty feet below where Antigone stood, a small stream of snow melt was bounding over boulders and cascading over small falls until it disappeared out of sight beneath the bridge.

The bridge itself was difficult to comprehend. At the center, possessing the entirety of the rounded crown, there stood the giant cedar tree Antigone had tumbled out of, the tree she had been looking at from her back in the drift of slush.

Antigone tugged her booted feet out of the slush and began to climb up the steep rounded back, following the skids and scrapes that marked the route she had just fallen down. Beneath each of her steps, water oozed out of moss and soft turf that was inches thick.

This tree, a braided bundle of muscled trunks heavier than any giant sequoia Antigone had ever seen in California, was almost as wide as the bridge at the trunk. At the root, it was much, much wider than the bridge. Roots as thick as cars had shattered the stone railings long ago, and now reached straight down to the canyon floor below. Those roots looked like living pylons, buttressing the bridge in place. Even a steel bridge would have collapsed under so… much…tree.

Antigone reach the first root, its striped bark gleaming and slick with moisture. She could see a crack in the trunk wide enough to wriggle through only five or six feet above her head, but there was no way for her to reach it. She'd need a ladder. Or pole-climbing spurs. Even a pair of ice boots would do the trick. But none of those were available.

Were the others just through that crack, still underground in Ashtown? Were they discussing her disappearance? Would Rupert be worried, or was this what he had expected? If so, he could have warned them. Her right knee was beginning to throb, as was the back of her head. She fingered her scalp, gently tracing the curve of a significant goose egg. Her hair was sticking to it and sticking to her fingertips. Blood, but only a little.

Antigone slapped the root in front of her. She definitely wouldn't be able to climb over the roots and cross this bridge without gear. And she wouldn't be able to climb back into Ashtown either. She was officially stuck until help arrived.

But stuck where? Oregon? Washington? Maybe Idaho or British Columbia? No. Those places could have cedars this size, but not stonework old enough to sit beneath them.

BOOM.

Antigone spun around, catching her breath as she did. The sound had been deep and close, strong enough to stand out despite the oceanic sighing of the wind in the canopy above her. Strong enough to vibrate the stones beneath the moss beneath her feet.

BOOM.

Rupert should come now. And Wiglaf. Especially Wiglaf.

Perched high on the arching bridge, Antigone could see past the snowdrift she had landed in and over the fallen logs behind it.

She was looking down at an island of moss and ferns and bare earth, cut into the shape of a six-pointed star and separated from the rest of the forest by a deep, jagged canyon.

To Antigone's left and to her right and directly across from her, five more enormous cedars stood on five more stone bridges, one at each point of the star. In the center of the star, there stood a large, hexagonal ring of gray standing stones.

BOOM.

Everything fern vibrated. Every fallen log and branch inside the star island bounced in place. Only the standing stones were still. Antigone had no category for the noise. No, that wasn't true. It made her think of Radu Bey's thunder. Of Azazel's smoking tail. It did not belong in the natural world.

Turning, Antigone jumped up on the cedar root, clawing at the slick bark with her fingernails and boots. She no longer wanted to be alone in this place. And she most certainly did not want to meet whatever it was that was making the ground thunder.

Antigone gained six inches in her climb toward the crack. She managed to hook her knee up on the sloped root, ignoring the pain. Eighteen inches. Only four more feet.

BOOM.

Antigone was already slipping back down the roots when Diana tumbled head-first out of the crack above her.

The two girls hit the moss in a tangle and tumbled down the steep bridge to the slush.

"You okay?" Diana asked, and she began to laugh. "Where is this? How did that work?"

"Shhh," Antigone said. "I'm fine," she whispered.

BOOM.

Antigone felt Diana tense in surprise. The older girl levered herself up onto her elbows, peering over the snow drift into the woods.

"There are bridges," Diana whispered. "And a stone circle on, I guess it's an island. A canyon goes all the way around it…"

"It's shaped like a star," Antigone whispered. She rolled up onto her knees beside Diana, ignoring the icy numbness creeping into her legs.

"Yeah," Diana said. "What was making that noise?"

"No idea," Antigone said.

BOOM BOOM.

While the two girls watched, the giant cedar two bridges to their left began to split and groan as it opened.

Diana unsnapped the holster on her hip.

The groaning and grinding stopped. The giant cedar tree stood open like a tunnel on the bridge. Two tall men emerged from the tunnel and began to descend toward the stone circle. They were both hunched at the shoulders, both swathed in thin strips of black cloth, both were much too thin for their height. The men carried a smaller body, shrouded in white, in between them. They walked directly to the stone circle and set the body on a mossy slab inside the ring.

Both men backed away from the shrouded body with long methodical steps.

"I am not liking this," Diana whispered to Antigone. "Not at all. I don't know what this is, but it's not good." Diana glanced back up the bridge at the tree behind her. "I wonder when Rupe is coming."

When the men in black were clear of the stone circle, they each pulled a dark glass sphere from their robes and raised them high. Two pulses of darkness throbbed outward from the spheres, drowning the woods in a flash of shadow.

BOOM BOOM.

The ground shook. Rotting logs hopped on the island around the stone circle, shedding bark and sluffing moss.

A heavy pack tumbled into the drift between Antigone and Diana.

The girls both looked back up at the tree. Two more packs launched out of the crack in the trunk.

The girls slid apart quickly as the packs piled up loudly between them.

"Oh, no," Antigone said.

A heavy fourth pack clattered down the roots before tumbling down the bridge. It slammed into the first three packs with a sound like a car wreck.

Antigone and Diana both flattened themselves against the icy drift. The men in black had to be looking up from the stone circle now, trying to spot the noisemakers. The men were creepy, but were they armed?"

Antigone and Diana were both pressing their cheeks in the snow, eye contact locked in place.

"What was that?" Antigone whispered. "A bag of armor?"

Diana was breathing hard, louder even than her whisper. "The, uh, bell clanger things from Ashtown. The bell tongues."

Trying to ignore the needles of cold burrowing into her cheek, Antigone watched as Diana rose onto her elbows to peer down at the island.

"Ginhom!" a voice shouted. "Mekhashfey!"

Diana slammed her face back into the slush.

"They saw us," Diana said.

"Us?" Antigone asked. "Seriously? You don't think they maybe spotted the red ponytail flapping in the snow?"

"Does it matter now?" Diana asked. "And I'm not a redhead."

Antigone laughed. "What are you then?"

"Not the time, Tigs," Diana said. "But, auburn. I guess."

Diana drew her long, silver-barreled pistol and thumb-cocked the hammer.

"Mekhashfey!" the men were yelling. "Mekhashfey!"

Diana rose to her knees, tossed her hair back, and aimed the large pistol down at the island with both hands. "Stay back!" she shouted. "Back! No one needs to get shot! Not even you creepers! Stay back!"

Antigone took in a long steadying breath. And then another, trying to slow her rabbiting heart. A crater melted in the snow in front of her face as she exhaled.

May as well, she thought, and in one quick motion, she pushed off the drift and landed up on her knees, reaching for her own holster as she did. The leather flap was torn and snapless, lifeless and limp.

The holster was empty.

"My gun," she said out loud.

When had she last checked it? She'd been wearing a pistol in the tunnel, down by the river.

Before she'd fallen in…

Before the Livingstones had pulled her out. Was that when she'd lost it? Or was it in explosion? Had she been wearing it when she woke in the Room of Ways? Could she remember feeling the protective weight against her hip as she'd searched the picture frames?

Did it matter?

The tall, slender men had both drawn needle-thin black blades that matched their frames—long for knives, short for swords. Both were approaching with needles raised. Both men had shrouded faces. They were shoeless, skinless, and faceless. Every inch of them was wrapped in thin black strips of cloth, from toes to eyes to fingertips.

"Take the one on the left," Diana said.

"Di." Antigone felt around her belt. She still had her knife. "I lost my gun."

Diana glanced at her but didn't answer. She focused her attention back down her barrel.

"Not gonna say it again!" Diana yelled. "Not. Gonna!"

The men kept coming.

Diana's gun jumped in her hands as she fired at the ground in front of the men. Her bullet kicked off a stone with a rooster tail of sparks and whined away into the woods.

The men stopped.

"Mekhashfey," one of them said. With their cloth-bound faces, it was impossible to tell which one was actually speaking.

"Hoy!" Niffy shouted behind Antigone. "Is there no decent way down into this devil's world?"

Looking back, Antigone saw the Irish monk's thick pale thighs dangling out of the crack in the trunk and wriggling against the damp cedar bark. As he slid further out of the tree, his robe hitched up around his hips.

Just like he had been the day Antigone had first met him, Brother Boniface Brosnan was wearing his favorite orange and green and white Irish flag boxer shorts beneath his robe. A bit too publicly for Antigone's taste.

"Mazek!" the men in black said. "Mazek!"

As if commanded, Niffy slipped and fell. A ball of mohawk and robe, white thighs and Irish pride tumbled down the bridge much faster than Antigone had and launched over the packs like a jump.

Niffy flipped off the slush drift and landed, sprawling, in the moss and mud of the star island no more than thirty feet from the dark mummies.

"Niff!" Diana shouted. "Knives incoming!"

The hunching men in black loped toward the prone monk like undead giraffes.

Diana fired above them, but neither man broke stride.

Niffy leapt up like a spring exploding free of some mechanical cage. In his left hand, he held his own black blade, shorter and thicker than his opponents. With his right, he jerked a long, thin, golden serpent free of his thick waist.

One moment, the snake had been invisible. In the next, a golden glow surrounded Niffy, heightened by the shadows of the trees. The long golden viper dangled from Niffy's hand like a whip, thickening and hissing at the men in black.

"Do not think ye can touch me unharmed, devils!" Niffy bellowed. "Be ye sprites or faeries or sorcerers, my Patrik will wet his fangs in your flavorless hides!"

The dark mummies hesitated, and for a moment Antigone thought it might be from fear. Or at least surprise. They turned their shrouded faces toward each other, and then, for the first time, they both straightened up to their full heights.

The top of Niffy's mohawk did not reach their collarbones.

"Tigs," Diana said. "Those needle things aren't knives. Wands, maybe. Not knives."

The wands in the men's hands had begun to twist and thicken in the air, along with the human arms that held them. While Antigone watched, the wands fanned out into black cobra hoods at least two feet across. The men sprouted scales as their long lean bodies dropped into heavy coils on the soft soil.

They weren't just snakes, despite the hissing the cobra heads. They were much worse than that. The wriggling creatures that had replaced the two men both crouched on four low-clawed legs. And both fanned short leather wings, splayed between impossibly long fingers.

Niffy swore and took one step back, bracing himself to fight. Patrik held his ground, thickening his own girth, puffing his chest, and brightening his glow until he looked almost as heavy as the black monsters across from him.

While twin cobra hoods swayed, the scaly throats below them inflated like the throats of bullfrogs. And then collapsed.

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BOOM.

BOOM.

Antigone shivered with the vibration.

Wiglaf's arrival should not have been so graceful. The huge man had somehow kept his feet in the drop, and he slid to an easy stop beside Antigone, clanking his boots against the pack full of bell tongues.

"Twin Naga," he said. "Why am I not surprised? Brother Boniface! Step back. Do not let their spittle touch you!"

Niffy backed away slowly. Once again, Patrik held his ground, lengthening his tail for Niffy's retreat.

Wiglaf rested a heavy hand on Antigone's shoulder and bent low to look her in the eyes, close enough for his rigid beard bristle to graze her still numb cheek. When he spoke, his breath smelled oddly familiar, pleasant despite its unpleasantness, like leather at an estate sale, like a dead man's favorite boots.

"If Rupert arrives, get my attention. We'll need the blade he carries to finish this. But any blessed metal will do to start."

Without any more explanation, Wiglaf unzipped the pack at his feet and pulled out two large bell tongues, thick shafts of tarnished bronze with hooks on one end and heavy bronze knobs on the other.

Flipping and spinning his chosen weapons like a drummer with new sticks, Wiglaf stepped easily over the snow drift and strode down toward the monsters.

BOOM.

BOOM.

"Do you know me in this dark place?" Wiglaf asked. "Have the other serpent slaves told you no tales? I am the Scylfing."

Both hissing hooded heads swayed.

"Your venom will not harm me," Wiglaf said. Patrik's golden head hovered beside Wiglaf's elbow "Depart this place now, Naga devils, or be cut from your vessels."

"Devils!" Niffy shouted back at the girls from behind Wiglaf. "I warned of devils, did I not?"

"Silence, Irish," Wiglaf said. "I have struck down many such as these before."

Both cobra mouths gaped. Long forked tongues lashed at the air, and vertical sheets of spat venom striped Wiglaf from his knees to his brow.

Wiglaf sighed. For a moment, his shoulders sagged. And then, the Scylfing exploded forward with both arms raised, erupting in fury, roaring like a monstrous bear. Startled, Antigone rocked backward and sat down in the snow.

The nearest Naga head struck at Wiglaf's dripping face.

Wiglaf slammed the two bell tongues together on either side of the creature's skull. With a crunch and a muffled clang, the cobra head and throat burst like a balloon filled with tar.

With his golden beard now dripping black, Wiglaf left the staggering headless monster striking blindly behind him and turned to face the second beast.

The Naga turned, and with the clumsy feet of a heavy crocodile, tried to race away.

Wiglaf dropped one bell tongue in the mud and leapt onto the fleeing serpent's back. With the added weight, it stumbled and staggered sideways into the standing stones. With his huge left hand, Wiglaf pinned the creatures' hood against the face of a stone. With his right, he struck.

A faint clang.

Tar geysered up the gray stone.

The stone cracked.

"What is all this?" Rupert Greeves asked, nudging Antigone's boot with his own.

Antigone jolted upright on a bed of moss. She hadn't been sleeping. No way. She'd just been somehow certain that she was sitting in the lobby of the Archer Motel trying not to breathe through her nose. Now, she inhaled through her nose and realized what smell she'd actually been trying to avoid.

"You must have dropped this when you fell through the tree," Rupert said, and he held out her silver pistol by the barrel. He was wearing two packs again, along with multiple holsters. His rifle and the Captain's Dracul sword stuck up over his shoulders. He also had five empty picture frames hooked over his left arm. "Where is Wiglaf?"

"Down in the stream," Diana said. "Washing off some of the nastiest black stuff I've ever seen. You can still smell it."

"Yes," Rupert said. "I can."

"Want me to explain?" Diana asked.

"Go on then," Rupert said. "But good money says it has something to do with the two headless Naga down by the stones."

Antigone looked around. Everyone who had been in the Room of Forbidden Ways was now in the wood. Smoke was curling out of the crack in the tree. Rupert had actually done it. He had literally burned his bridges. Or his boats. His doorway. Whatever it was.

Rupert had burned their way back into Ashtown. Into Wisconsin. Into that entire world. Where Cyrus was. And Dan. And her mother. And California and the old house on the cliffs and the Archer Motel and… her father's grave.

"They started as men," Diana said.

Rupert nodded. "They always do."

Antigone sniffed. Because of the cold, she thought. She wasn't sad or nervous or uneasy about never seeing her family again. Not at all. She looked back toward the standing stones.

"Two of them. And they got nasty quick," Diana continued. "We were lucky Wiglaf came through. They would have killed Niffy quick enough."

"No such nonsense!" Niffy said. "Not in a fair fight! The heads pop! Wouldn't have taken me long to learn that."

Niffy and his patrik were standing guard over the two headless serpent creatures that were now staggering around the little star island like very drunk monsters indeed.

The small shape shrouded in white still lay motionless on the slab in the center of the circle.

"We can't stay here tonight," Rupert said. "It has long been an evil place. I have read of it and the worlds it leads to. We build a fire, choose our next frame, and move on before darkness falls too thick."

Dan's ears were ringing, even through his headset. His heart was racing and the inside of his lungs were singed. The smell of gunpowder had taken over the stern from the very first round he'd fired.

A few dozen smoking brass shells lay on the deck like autumn leaves, promising a season of death.

Not one hit.

The big plane was long gone. As were the orangutans. But all nine black fliers were still swirling above the ship. They were so small, and their wings looked like hang-gliders. Even if he did hit one in the wing, he'd never know. It would just be a tear in the cloth, or the plastic. He needed to hit the engine, the prop, or the pilot.

Ghhhkkk. The crackle in his headset told him someone below decks wanted to speak, probably because he was no longer firing.

"Dan?" his mother asked. "Are you okay? Is it over?"

Dan pulled his headset mic back down to his mouth. "No, Mom, not over. Just starting."

He exhaled slowly and pushed his mic back up. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he do this?

Daniel Smith. The voice was Pythia's, and it wasn't coming through his headset. It was deep inside his head.

See, she said, *where they will be.*

Two burning leaves floated past the barrel of his gun. The fiery word on the first simply said, *CALM*. The second read, *IS STRONG*.

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Dan spun around in his seat. Pythia was standing on the deck right behind him, with empty shells rolling around her bare feet. Her hair was bundled together at her back, revealing the peace on her young dark, sunlit face. She smiled, closed her eyes, and pointed up. As she did, bullets began to punch the steel deck around them, sparking like lead hail.

Dan felt his heart slow, and with it, the world around him.

Swinging the gun around, he focused on the lowest flier. His eyes sharpened and he could see small flames spitting from a gun barrel between the pilot's feet. A moment later, more bullet rain.

His heart was beating with all the urgency of a napping cat. His greasy skin felt suddenly cool in despite the direct sun. Dan yawned, so deeply calm, he felt ready for a nap, for a blanket, for a long, deep sleep.

Tracing the movements of his target as the flier swung and swooped in its descent, Dan began to see the pattern. He saw what the pattern would be.

The black flier swung left. Dan traced an arc to the right, and he fired.

The gun bucked between his hands.

A single brass casing spat out onto the deck, trailing smoke.

In the sky, the flier swung back to the right.

In Daniel's state of icy calm, he felt no joy when flames exploded and small wings buckled, and the black shape began to plummet toward the sea trailing smoke.

Eight.

As more bullets rained down on the deck, Pythia moved forward, standing beside the gun with her face up. Daniel Smith swung death toward his next target.

This kettle of vultures would soon be a wake.

Or whatever vultures were called when they were all dead in the sea…

END OF CHAPTER 8 ✵

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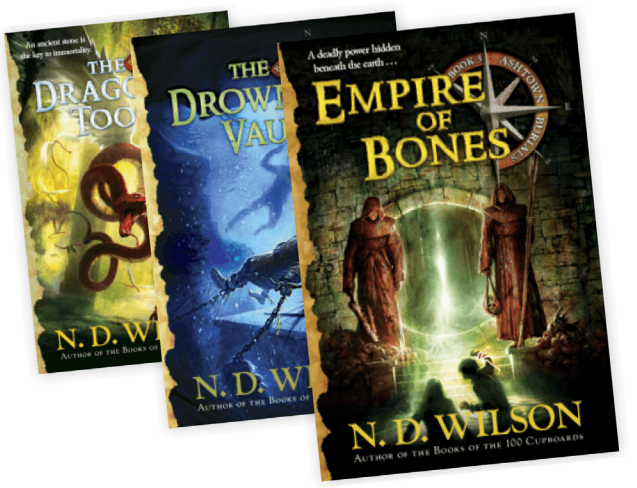
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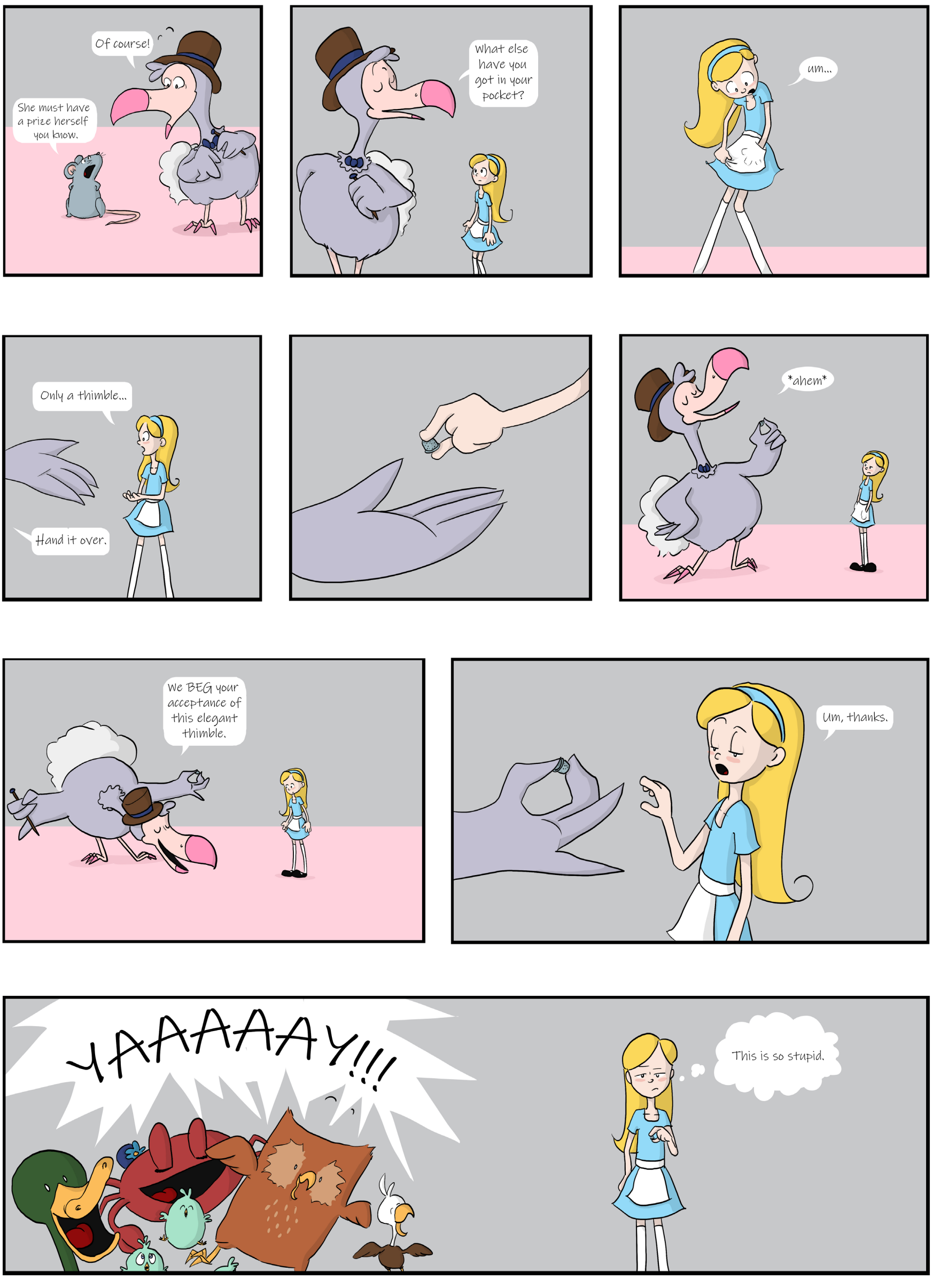

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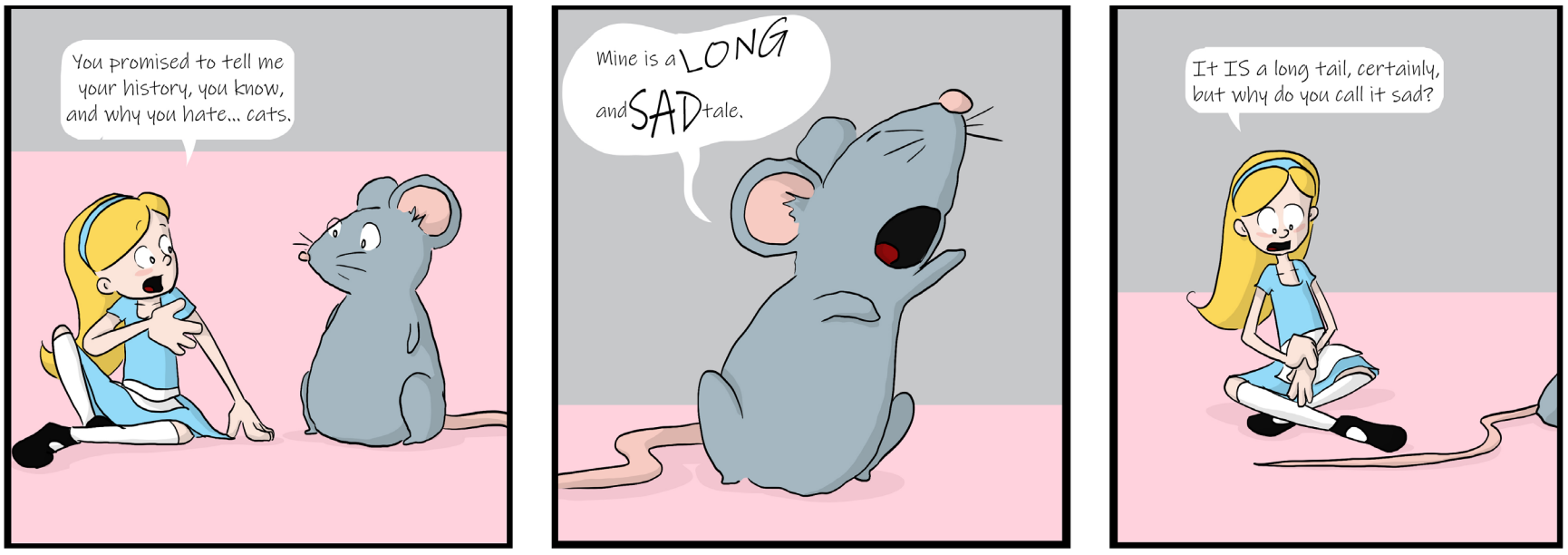
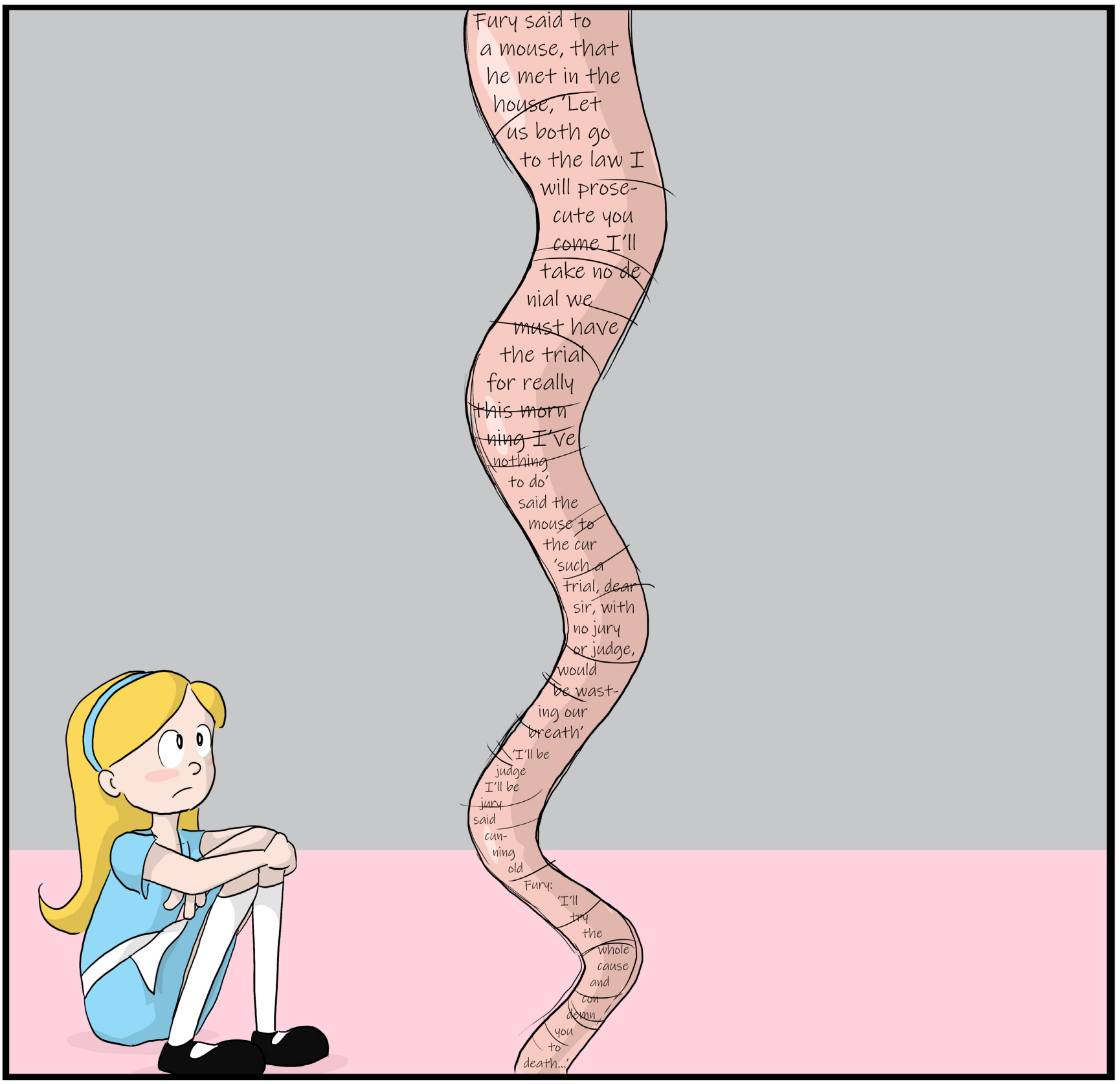

You promised to tell me your history, you know, and why you hate... cats.
Mine is a LONG and SAD tale.
It IS a long tail, certainly, but why do you call it sad?


Fury said to a mouse, that he met in the house, 'Let us both go to the law I will prose- cute you come I'll take no de nial we must have the trial for really this morn ning I've nothing to do' said the mouse to the cur 'such a trial, dear sir, with no jury or judge, would be wast- ing our breath' 'I'll be judge I'll be jury said cun- ning old Fury: 'I'll try the whole cause and con demn you to death...'

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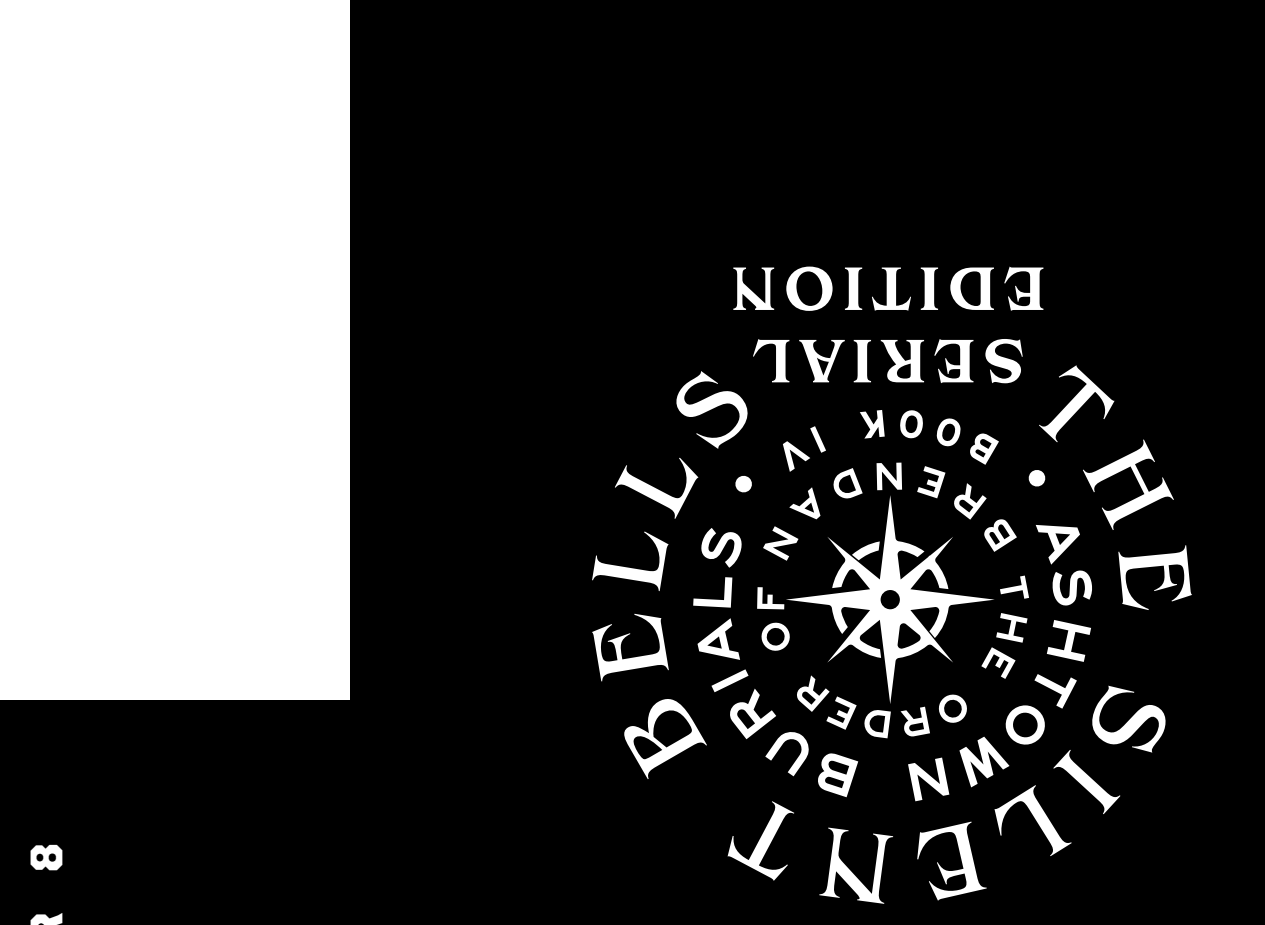

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CHAPTER NINE

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9

BORN OF FLAME

Another day was gone and the dusk was dying above Ashtown when Arachne reached the muddy, gaping hole near the center of the Estate's once manicured courtyard. For uncounted hours, Arachne had been recruiting, first seeking out every basement and cellar in Ashtown before wandering the enormous, often broken web of heat tunnels that had once tied every building and hall and walkway of the Estate together. Arachne had looked up into the zoo from below grates in the floor. She had seen armories and galleries and libraries, all from inside the walls and floors and ceilings. She had visited hangars and stables, boat houses and pastures. Even in an empty acre of land, with a little patience and the right song in her mind, Arachne could gather more than a million spiders to herself. Human structures increased that number, and the grounds of Ashtown, both landscaped and wild, spanned hundreds of acres. Arachne had visited all of it… all but the underground aqueduct below the crater in the courtyard.

Everywhere Arachne had gone, she had trailed an ever-growing eight-legged deluge of death behind her, an army of arachnids that had lined every inch of every tunnel she had passed through—walls, ceiling, and floor. Not one spider had felt her presence without joining in and following behind. Not one insect, bird, or rodent had survived her passing. And when her army had already grown vast, she had walked the woods and the fields and the meadows inside and outside Ashtown's walls.

Arachne had sensed Azazel groping for her mind all day, but her mind was already in conversation with millions, and the dragon's thoughts and threats were not things she feared. Nor was his flesh vessel, Radu Bey. She was not fearless because she could personally defeat either of them. No, she knew that was unlikely. She was fearless because she had long ago lost her fear of pain, and because she was angry. Angry that Gil had been enticed by the dragons into betraying her. Angry that Ashtown was in ruins. Angry that Azazel and Radu Bey hunted her friends without fear of any reprisal. That anger, as strong as bundled spider silk and as cold and ruthless as an arctic wind, was now felt, and therefore shared, by every member of her army, the most numerous army ever to walk the surface of the planet Earth.

Arachne, the frail and pale weaver with skin like paper in moonlight and fireless eyes like twin pools of mourning, wanted to face the dragons. She wanted to stand eye to eye with the last Dracul in his human flesh. She wanted to inflict her intense displeasure on every centimeter of both of his incarnations regardless of what might happen to her own flesh in retaliation.

Arachne had gathered her army, and she was ready.

The spider bag hung heavy and splitting at Arachne's waist. Heavier than a sack of water, it overflowed in a flood of legs and fangs down her own legs, spilling into a boiling pool that stretched into a boiling lake that trampled and crushed the shaggy, uncut grass in every direction around her. Arachne was as motionless as a statue in a fountain, but the courtyard all around her was alive and seething, swarming with tens of millions of furious spiders behind a vanguard of whip spiders all eager to please the woman who compelled them at a level deeper than any instinct. They were her spider tide, yearning to touch her, to serve her, to destroy her enemies even if they were themselves destroyed, a plague of plagues.

Arachne looked down into the crater. She knew the dragon was down there somewhere, digging in the tunnels around the aqueduct for Rupert and Antigone and however many of the other humans had survived. It was time to hunt the hunters.

Spider girl…

The dragon's voice was hot and unpleasant in her head.

…traitoress. Stay this course, and we will drink your cold blood and feed you to your pets. Or…

Arachne declined to answer the dragon, even in her mind. Instead, she spun a command, like ghost silk, and sent it out into her millions while the dragon continued.

Does the choice of Gilgamesh not grieve you? I can take your grief for you. Come to me. Lay down your pain and your sorrow. I can restore you to your kind, even to Gilgamesh of Uruk.

More than one hundred thousand orb weavers stumbled through the tiny sea of bodies toward the edge of the jagged hole. Each weaver had a heavy, tri-corner abdomen swollen into the shape of a tiny, blind cat's head. Despite their unathletic movements, the orb weavers wove the strongest silk of any within Arachne's reach.

Arachne watched as her living loom tumbled up and over and under each other in what looked like chaos. But glittering braided cords sprouted out of the tangle, anchored by thousands of tiny strands to wide patches of grass.

Crouching, Arachne picked up a cord in each hand. She did not tug them or test them. She did not need to. She knew they were stronger than steel.

Arachne stepped over the edge of the hole and began to descend into the darkness.

A whispering waterfall of spiders poured into the crater behind Arachne, like a tide following the moon, trailing sheets and sheets of silver silk behind them.

ANTIGONE SMITH SHIVERED where she sat, perched on a wide and soggy log with the heels of her boots pulled in as close to her backside as she could get them. The leather shoulders of her belted jacket complained as she stretched them tight, hugging her knees for warmth. Diana turned in place beside a hissing and steaming bonfire and looked back Antigone's way. Every one of the refugees from Ashtown was gathered around the fire. At least everyone who was conscious. George and Nolan were wrapped in blankets in some ferns next to Jax's empty wheelchair. Jax was in his own blanket, sitting on a log beside the fire. Night in this place was far colder than the summer nights in Wisconsin.

"You can come closer," Diana said. "There's no reason to be cold."

"Not going near those things," Antigone said, pointing at the two headless Naga across the flames from her where Wiglaf had leashed them both to stakes. "And I don't really want to see what Wiglaf does to them next. How are they still alive without heads?"

"Because they were men in demented form," Rupert said. "Those were not their true heads." Rupe was crouching beside Diana, leaning toward the fire with a small but stout book in his hands, studying the pages by firelight.

Greeves had yet to take either of his packs off. His rifle and the Captain's swords were still strapped to his back. Brass shell casings glinted in bandoliers across his chest. The picture frames that Rupert had brought from the Room of Ways were stacked in the ferns next to George Livingstone and Nolan.

"What Wiglaf does to those things will be far less disturbing than the things themselves," Rupert said. He licked his forefinger and flipped a page. "Just because Cyrus isn't here doesn't mean you have to be stubborn for him, Antigone. We won't be in this place much longer, but there's no need for a chill while we are."

Across the island, Jeb, Niffy, Big Ben Sterling, and Silas Livingstone were gathering more wood on Wiglaf's instruction—he had wanted all of it in log form, all of it wet and heavy. As for Wiglaf, he had descended into the dark canyon that surrounded the island.

Antigone could hear the wood foragers laughing, crashing, and complaining in the dark. Big Ben Sterling, whose goat-hoof prosthetic feet kept sinking into the soft earth, mixed a constant string of seaworthy curses with snapping twigs and the jingling of the bells in his ears.

The headless necks of the Naga swayed with the popping of the fire, but slowly, like grass on the bottom of a sleepy river. Somehow, despite their lack of skulls or the brains that went inside of them, the creatures appeared to have made peace with their situation. And they were both benefiting from the warmth of the fire far more than Antigone was.

"I'm fine," Antigone said. "I'm not that cold." Her ribs trembled as she said it, and she bit her tongue as soon as the words were out, just to keep her teeth from rattling.

"Lie," Rupert said. "I taught you better, Antigone Smith. Honesty in the field, Tigs. Honesty everywhere, really. But especially in the field." He smiled. "But if you must lie to me, at least attempt some skill in the craft."

"Do we really have to do this?" Antigone asked. "Why can't we just leave? You said we're going somewhere warm."

Rupert nodded and turned another small page with his large fingers. "We are. Whatever else it may be, it will be warmer than this doomed place."

"Then let's go now," Antigone said. "At least let Diana and I go ahead or something. I don't want to be here another minute. It feels…"

"Cold?" Rupert asked.

"I was going to say creepy," Antigone said. "So creepy. Creepy even without the headless things or that little mummy in the stone circle. Creepier even than my first night in the Polygon. Honestly, that's probably the closest feeling I've ever had to this one."

"It's not so much the creep that gets you," Diana said. "It's the humidity."

Rupert laughed out loud.

"Really, Di?" Antigone asked. "I'm serious!"

"I am, too," Diana said. "Cold is always tough, but cold and wet gets into your bones fast and deep. Then it takes hours to get back out. Add some whip spiders or some—"

"Headless snake men?" Antigone offered.

"Sure. Some headless snake men," Diana said. "Add them for peak creep. Either way, it's the wet that really gets to you—mind and body. It messes you up. Everything is creepier when wet. Which," she added, "is why this fire would be so great for you. Warm the creep away."

"Rupe?" Antigone didn't think Diana's humidity explanation deserved a response. "Why can't we go on ahead to the warm place?"

"Two reasons, Antigone Smith," Rupert said. "Verily, yay, three that prevent me from allowing you to do anything of the kind."

"Go on then," Antigone said, rubbing her legs. "Let me at 'em."

Rupert closed his little book on his finger and rose from his crouch, turning his back to the popping flames as he did.

"Right out the gate," Rupert said. "I don't know which doorway is correct. The sketches in this book are not as clear and I had hoped, so I brought all of the possible doorways. I'll not be sending you two off in a fog. Second, and most importantly, we bear the burden of Brendan."

"Great," Antigone said. "Brendan has a burden. Of course, he does. Why hasn't it come up before?"

"Oh, he does, and it has," Diana laughed. "It's not complicated."

"And lastly," Rupert continued. "I am unsure of what we will find even when we do reach our correct destination. If explanations or acts of violence are required…I should be present."

"Fine," Antigone said. "But please explain the burden of Brendan. I know you want to, Rupe. Explaining is your favorite. That and telling secrets. And what can I do to help speed this whole process up and get us out of here?"

"Simple enough on both counts." Rupert reopened his little book. "You can warm up and stop complaining."

Something snapped in the darkness beyond Antigone, and she spun around on her log. Wiglaf, shirtless and dripping, emerged from the shadows between the trees. Wiglaf was wearing his leather kilt and nothing else. His tall boots were in his left hand. His shirt and heavy sweater were in his right. Steam was rising from his hair, his beard, and every inch of his bare skin… although, the carpet of thick blond hair on his chest and arms and belly made it seem as if the giant Swede was still fully clothed. Only his shoulders were hairless, and they were fully dressed in a tapestry of scars.

The big man hesitated at the edge of the light, assessing the crowd around the fire. The firelight danced in a bright ring on his shaggy and knotted chest.

"Feeling better?" Rupert asked.

"A deep snow soak cools her," Wiglaf said. "But not for long." He took a step forward.

"They know nothing," Rupert said. "It was not my secret to share."

Wiglaf took another step forward, snapping a heavy limb beneath

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his bare feet, and Antigone realized what she was seeing, and what secret Wiglaf the Scylfing had decided to share.

Niffy and Jeb shuffled out of the woods on the other side of the fire, carrying eight feet of log between them. They tossed the log onto the bonfire. sending a storm of sparks streaming upward like stars taking their place on creation day. Antigone didn't see Sterling and Silas anywhere.

Wiglaf cleared his throat. The ring of firelight on his triple-barreled chest grew, twisting and spinning in place.

"Tell me this, Antigone Smith," Wiglaf said, ignoring every pair of staring eyes around the fire. "If you found a viper on a church pew, what would you do?"

The bonfire's hissing multiplied. Smoke and steam climbed into a plume taller than the trees.

"Do I have a machete with me in this scenario?" Antigone asked, looking up from the fiery ring on the man's chest, up past his dripping beard and into the dark shadows surrounding his eyes. "Or maybe a gun?"

"You have only the knowledge," Wiglaf said, "that if you walk away from such a thing in such a place, you have gifted death to another who follows after."

"The burden of Brendan," Rupert said, "is simple. Leave no evil unaddressed. Love even the neighbors you will never meet, struggle against the darkness along every path, labor for those who will remain forever unseen, for those who may not even exist. Brendan's own words are probably best."

"Faithful feet make paths safe for the pilgrims who follow," Rupert said. "Faithful hands…"

"Pluck the thorns," Diana answered, standing taller, and holding her hands to the fire behind her back.

"Though our palms bleed!" Jeb shouted, still shuffling with a log under his arm.

"May our feet," Jax said from his. Antigone hadn't even realized the boy was awake.

"Trample serpents!" Niffy bellowed. "May our foxes…"

"I don't know that one," Dennis said. "Does anyone else know that one?"

Beside him, little Hillary Drake shook her head. "I don't think that one's really one," she said. "I knew all of them when I was little."

The fire hissed and popped. Wiglaf approached. He was standing almost beside Antigone now. She could feel more warmth coming off him than she could feel from the fire. And she could see the living, blistered dragon in his chest perfectly.

"C'mon, then!" Niffy brushed bark and mud off his hands. "The O of B lost the foxes? The Cryptkeepers of Monasterboice really were the true children, then, weren't we? It's one of the very first from Brendan's mouth. From the tale of Samson. *May our foxes burn thrones and vineyards!"*

Rupert laughed. Diana smiled. "Catchy," she said. "I can't imagine how it was forgotten."

"Okay," Antigone said, still not looking away from Wiglaf's golden glow. "I get the burden thing. No leaving booby traps—or vipers—behind for other people. But where are we and what was the booby trap? I thought this wasn't even our world."

"It's not our world," Niffy said. "No chance at that."

"There is only one world," Rupert said. "One reality called into existence when time itself was born. But there are more tangles and byways and overlayers to that world than our minds can comprehend. And madness is never far from those who wander those ways. The Order has seen many of her children addled by foolish exploration." He held up the little book. "Much of this was written by one such, an Avengel who ended his days diseased and drooling."

While Rupert spoke, Wiglaf set down his boots and his sweater and drew a handful of shavings from a pocket in his kilt before approaching the fire. Diana and Niffy parted to let the bare skinned giant through.

Wiglaf tossed his shavings into the fire.

Searing white heat slapped Antigone in the face where she sat. Diana and Rupert and every other mortal staggered backward and scrambled away.

In seconds, the moisture had roared out of the logs and flames groped upward between the towering cedars, toasting the undersides of high branches.

Antigone slid off her log and backed away through the ferns. Rupert scooped up the picture frames and did the same. Every one of the refugees retreated from the heat, and the Naga lurched toward the standing stones, tugging at their leashed ankles.

Wiglaf positioned himself between the headless Naga as the creatures writhed in pain.

"These are the vipers," the big man said. "Even dragons as little and impotent as these could devour the unsuspecting. And long ago, I swore an oath to a dying kinsman that I would crush the seed of every dark dragon I came across. Even without Brendan and his burden, this I must do."

Every hair on Wiglaf's body glowed like fine wire in a forge. At the root, near his jaw, his beard turned the orange of potent coals. At the end, near his chest, his beard went white hot. But not as white hot as the blister dragon, boiling and twisting in wide ring beneath his skin. It was a two-legged, six-winged serpent with a long, lashing tail of flame.

While Antigone and the others watched in shock, the scaly flesh of the Naga began to smoke. The leashes around their ankles ignited and burned away, but before the beasts could escape, Wiglaf grabbed them by the backs of their empty necks. With his rippling arms extended straight out from his sides, the bare-armed, bare-chested, barefoot Scylfing dragged the two black beasts into the still growing fire. In the center, he stood with them inside whipping flames.

Blood like tar fell from the Naga onto the coals, hissing into white fire with every drop. Wiglaf's skin did not blister or blacken, and he showed no sign of pain. In his hands, the twin serpents melted into men. When the serpent forms were entirely gone, Wiglaf retreated from the flames and dropped the long, limp forms of the men into cool ferns, crouching in his smoking kilt above them.

Behind Wiglaf the fire began to settle into something more familiar, although still as hot and tall as any beach bonfire Antigone had ever seen.

"Naga," Wiglaf growled. "Little dragons. I am Wiglaf the Scylthing, born of flame, baptized in the fiery death-breath of leviathan, slayer of serpents greater than any of your slavish kind. You will obey me."

Once more grabbing the two forms, Wiglaf stood, lifting two tall, whimpering men up to their feet in the firelight. The black mummy cloths that had been wrapped tight around them when Antigone had first seen them in the wood were now mostly burned away, revealing pronounced noses and faces that would have unremarkable on bus drivers or accountants. Drooping, pale skin clung to their sunken chests, and the firelight striped their human ribs with deep shadows.

The men both had bulging black blisters writhing in the center of their chests—four legged, and stubby winged. Cobra heads.

Antigone had seen the living and bloody blister of the dragon Azazel

in the chest of Radu Bey. Now, she had seen the golden serpent in Wiglaf's chest. And these, the color of hot tar.

"Rupe," Wiglaf said. "Bring the Captain's blade. Surgery is required to finish this before we release these two fools through their gate." He grinned at both men. "No more Naga for you. Those little devils are under new management."

An hour after the two thin men had fled back up their bridge and through their cedar gate, the party from Ashtown sat quietly around the broad circle of embers. Heat warped the air above the fire's remains, but it was now tolerable.

Two black glass spheres sat in the coals, absorbing the light.

Antigone and Diana sat side by side. No one seemed to feel much like talking after what they had seen. But Antigone had so many questions, and eventually, she needed them answered.

Wiglaf was snoring in the ferns, once more wearing his sweater and knee-high boots over woolly socks.

Antigone coughed, clearing her already empty throat, hoping Rupert would look at her.

He didn't.

Rupert was staring at the glass spheres in the fire.

"So…" Antigone said. "Are we gonna talk about all that?"

No one responded. "Rupe?" she asked.

Rupert grunted.

"What kind of transmortal is Wiglaf? I think we need to know."

Rupert glanced at the snoring giant.

"I can answer that one," Big Ben Sterling said, scratching at his dark beard. His ears jingled as he turned his face toward Antigone. "The kind I'll never be crossing… or inviting to any quiet bonfires amongst friends."

Rupert didn't acknowledge Sterling's humor. His eyes returned to the black glass spheres in the fire.

"Wiglaf is known to us for two things," Rupert said. "When his kinsman rode out to face one of the great serpents, all others fled. Only Wiglaf stood fast, and he struck the blow that laid that worm low. Although he helped his dying cousin slide a blade between the scales to close the chapter, that dragon fell by his hand."

"That tale is long told," Niffy said. "Although not in exactness."

Rupert smiled at the young, mohawked monk. "No," he said. "Not in exactness. Our snoring friend was a mortal man when he faced that nightmare. No longer afterward. The true struggle was much greater than a physical fight."

"What does that mean?" Antigone asked.

"It means," Rupert said. "The dragon Wiglaf faced with his kinsman was immortal. When the two men destroyed its borrowed physical flesh, the serpent needed a new vessel. It entered Wiglaf, attempting to possess and rule him. But Wiglaf's will was stronger."

"My will was nothing," Wiglaf said from the ferns. "My God was stronger. The wyvern wyrm is my curse. I can only hope the struggle does not end before the world does. Then, I will be made new. If my struggle ends before then, well…I cannot die without unleashing the demon. And like all great dragons, fire is mine to wield. Flames cannot harm me."

"Could you become a dragon?" Antigone asked. "Like Radu Bey? Or like those black things, the Naga? Can you change shape?"

Wiglaf sat up and nodded. "I can, small one. And I have. Many, many times over the centuries. The return is more difficult with each transformation."

"As is polite behavior, perhaps?" The voice belonged to Nolan. Antigone spun around to see the pale, transmortal thief who had been her roommate in the Polygon standing in the shadows. Nolan was peeling long strips of translucent skin off his arms. "You had shut yourself up on an island with icy water and lava and very few people. There must have been a reason. Did you eat a village? Or maybe you just wanted to."

Nolan moved on from his arms and began peeling the skin off his forehead as Antigone scrambled to her feet.

"Nikales," Wiglaf said.

"Wiglaf," said Nolan. "Lovely to see you. It's been a century or two. Last time I saw you, you were torching a fleet of sailing ships, I believe?"

Antigone wrapped Nolan up in a hug, squeezing his ribs as tight as she could.

"Still sore," Nolan grunted, tapping Antigone on the shoulders. "Quite sore."

Antigone released him and stepped back. "I am so glad you're okay."

"Unsure if okay is the correct term," Nolan said. "The last thing I remember, a living giant of clay had exploded, and I was being grated by the shrapnel like a cheese in one of Sterling's machines."

"Nolan," Rupert said. "I'm glad you're back among the living, and not just so we can stop carrying you. I need your help selecting a doorway."

"A doorway?" Nolan said, looking around the island. "Here?"

"Yes, but not from here," Rupert said. "I brought them with us." He lifted a picture frame up from the ferns.

Nolan laughed. "You came through the Room of Ways?" He turned in place, taking in the giant cedars on the stone bridges for the first time. "Well, Rupert Greeves, who's the world-walking rule-breaker now? The O of B will take a dim view."

"We are the O of B," Rupert said. "Have you ever been to the Carthage Estate?"

END OF CHAPTER 9

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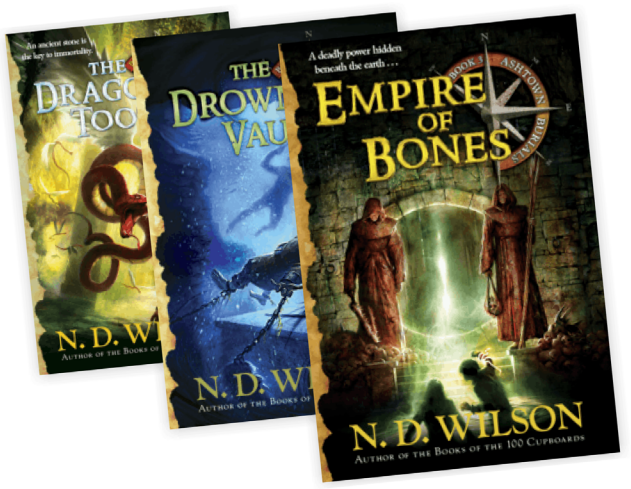

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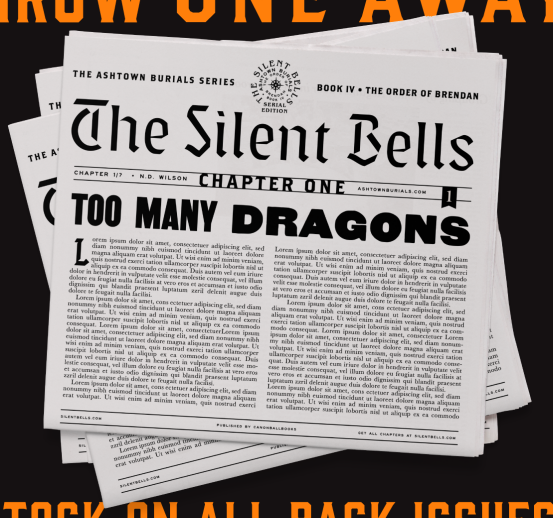

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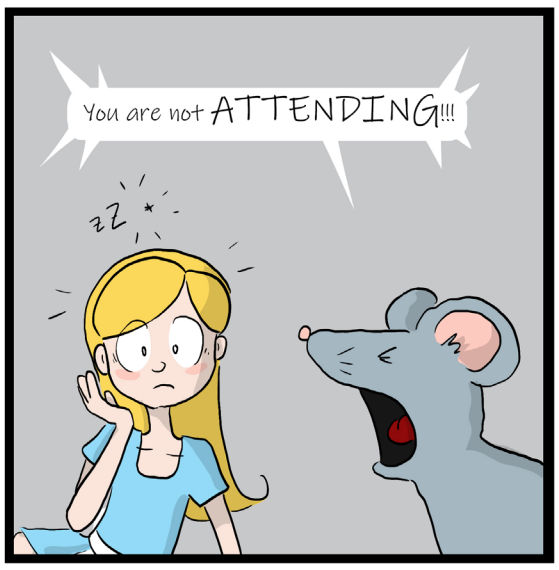
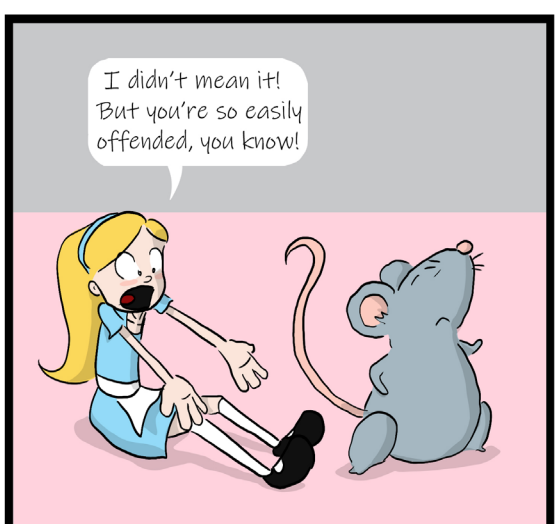
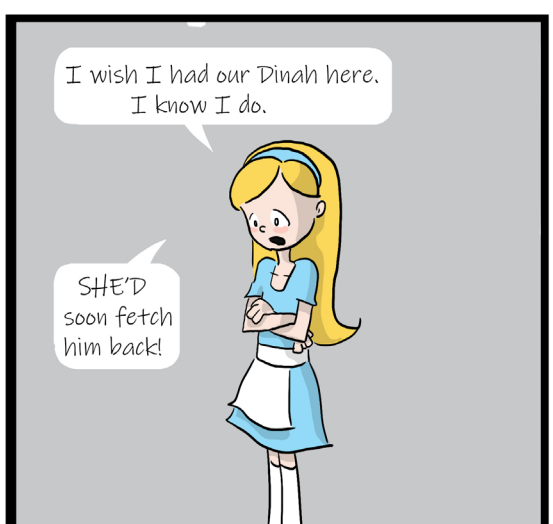
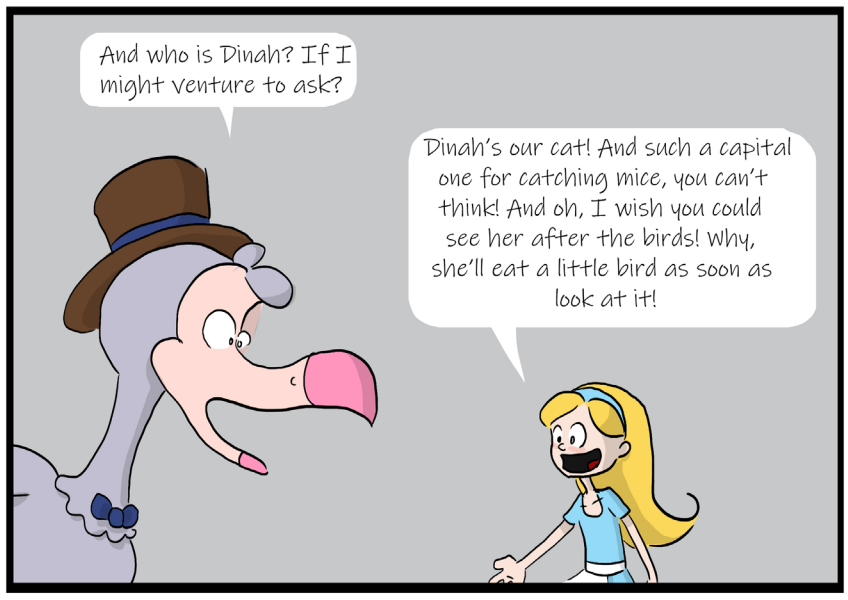
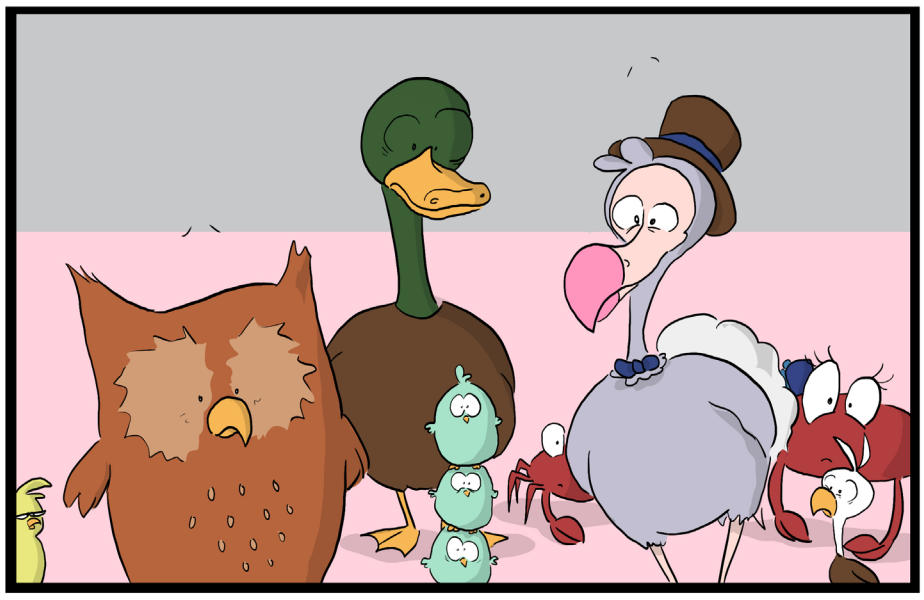
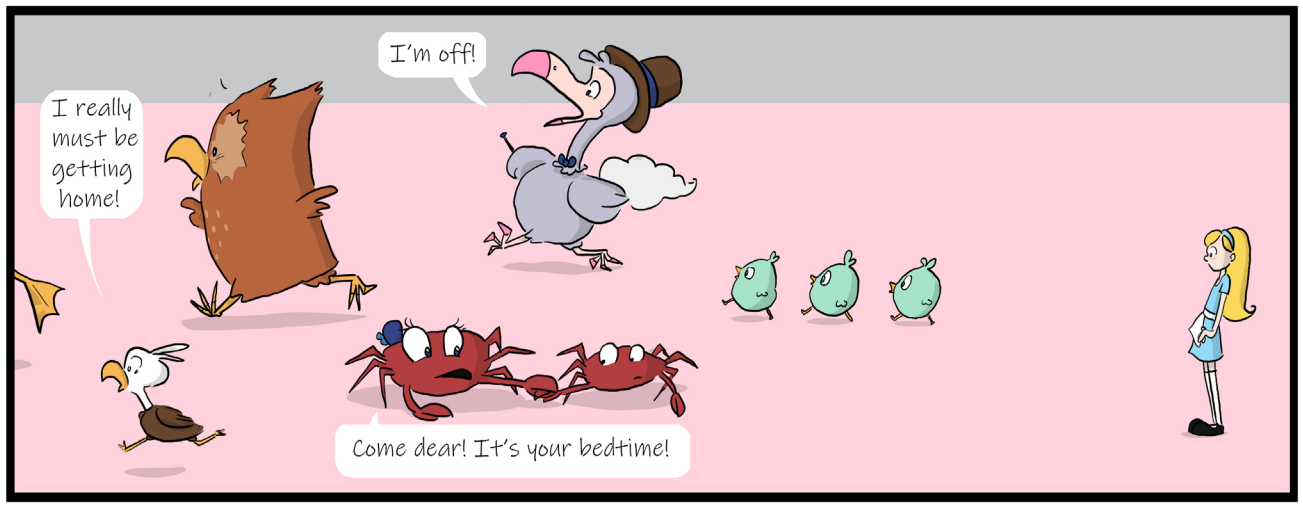







And who is Dinah? If I might venture to ask?
Dinah's our cat! And such a capital one for catching mice, you can't think! And oh, I wish you could see her after the birds! Why, she'll eat a little bird as soon as look at it!





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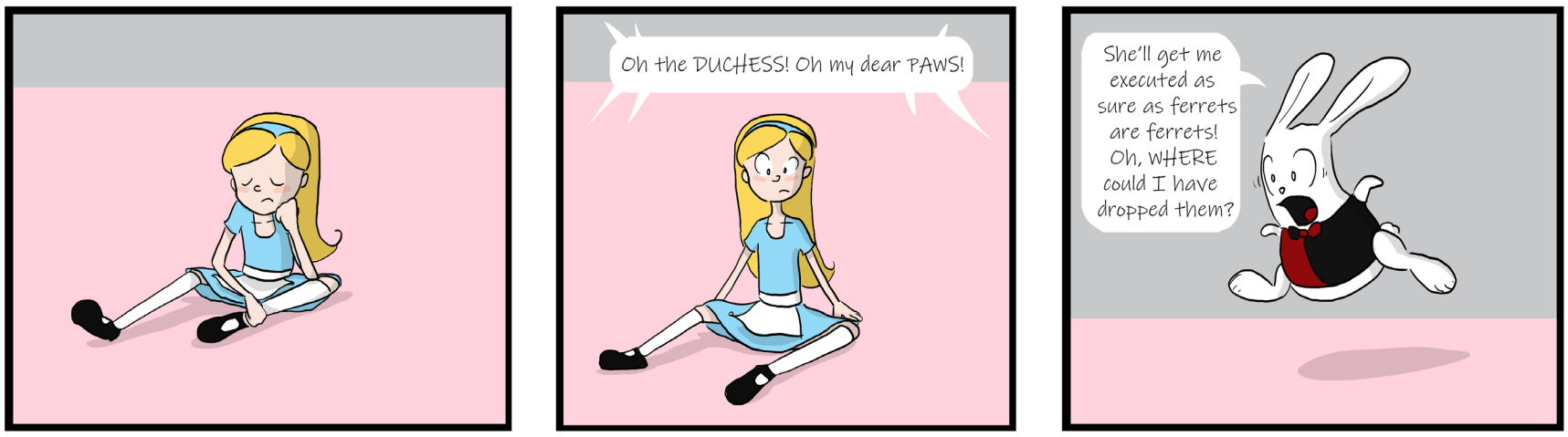
Oh the DUCHESS! Oh my dear PAWS!
She'll get me executed as sure as ferrets are ferrets! Oh, WHERE could I have dropped them?
Why, MARY ANNE?!
What are you doing out here?
Run home THIS MOMENT and fetch me a pair of gloves. QUICK NOW!
He took me for his housemaid!
How surprised he'll be when he finds out who I am!
But I'd better get him his gloves if I can find them.
How queer it seems to go on errands for a rabbit!

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CHAPTER TEN

N.D. WILSON

10

SOLOMON'S SEAT

The arched stone ceiling above the underground river now pulsed with firelight, glowing like a coal furnace. The fast-moving river and the slick, stone walls were colored more like a tunnel to Hell than a tunnel to Lake Michigan.

Before shifting out of his dragon form, Radu Bey had set fire to every flammable structure and object within sight of the iron bridge where Antigone Smith and the others had escaped. The old light bulbs had all exploded. The wiring had melted. The baskets were all crackling on their cables above the river. Small storages sheds and hutches were all ablaze against the walls. The fires hadn't solved anything, but they had helped Azazel express the depth of Radu Bey's irritation.

Now, a river of smoke traveled along the peak of the tunnel ceiling, like a ghostly reflection of the river below.

Radu Bey, in human form, paced the stone walkway beside the water, broken chains dangling from his wrists and rattling behind his ankles as he went. Radu's feet and legs were bare. His arms and torso were also bare, but striped with soot and char. His olive skin was slick with sweat and the river's moisture, even where the blood-black dragon blister writhed on his chest, eager to once again explode into physical control and set more things on fire.

The other transmortals were all across the bridge, still working to clear the tunnel there.

Radu stopped beside the broken and charred body of Alan Livingstone. The big man lay face down on the stone walkway, not far from the iron bridge. His burned sleeves had melded with the skin and sinew of his thick arms. The courage the man had shown in his last stand angered Radu Bey even more than the escape Alan had enabled. Even dead, Radu hated Alan for it. A determined mortal could somehow cling to every drop of life when laying all of it down for others. This mortal irony was one Radu had encountered many times through the centuries—in both men and women, in slaves and kings, warriors and priests, in anyone attempting to purchase minutes or days or weeks for others. And it had angered Radu Bey every time. Physical strength helped prolong such death stands, but strength of will, and strength of love, were much bigger factors in how long a self-sacrificial victim could fight on.

The human bull elephant Alan Livingstone had survived and continued fighting through an impossible degree of damage. How Alan's soul, his strength, his will, had remained in his flesh without charm or witchcraft, Radu Bey could not understand.

Blinded by fire and charred to his bones, the man had somehow kept bellowing and brawling through lightning strikes and fireballs, even using his blades on his knees, once his legs finally given out.

As a result, the other humans had escaped, collapsing a tunnel behind them.

Radu Bey had been a transmortal for so long, he couldn't imagine a calculus for self-sacrifice. Nothing under the Earth's sun could possibly be worth his dying. Even as a powerful young mortal, rage and hunger and envy had been the only passions that had fueled his strength. Never love. To the bloodthirst of Radu Bey, love was the weakest of all fires.

And yet…could he still believe that?

Not far outside the walls of Byzantium, Radu Bey had seen an old monk make a furious stand with swords, laughing and alone in a gate against hundreds. In Tripoli, two young slaves, barely more than children—brothers—had poured out their lives on a pier while dozens smaller and younger had escaped to the sea. When the stones of St. Elmo's on Malta had finally been beaten into dust, and the moat had been filled to overflowing with the bodies of the Sultan's Janissaries, the sun had risen and the fog had cleared around a ragged knight named Colonel Mas, ready to defend against the next assault, propped upright in a chair by his brothers, using his last breaths to sing in the morning light. Only one other had ever matched Mas, a Dutchman with five hundred arrows in him, holding a bridge against an army of thousands for the better part of day, just long enough for an entire city to evacuate behind him.

Fury at those men had consumed Radu Bey for days afterward. Fury and envy. An envy he felt at the roots of his mind again now.

In the centuries since those men in Malta and Holland, Alan Livingstone's last stand in the aqueduct beneath Ashtown was the only Radu had witnessed that approached the same level. Radu's anger as he paced the walkway beside the river was as much tied to Alan's courage as it was to the escape of the mortals.

"Get through it!" Radu Bey bellowed across the bridge. "It's only rubble! I want their lives, not their suffocated carcasses!"

They are gone. Azazel's voice was quiet but firm in Radu's mind.

Only the souls of Gilgamesh and Arachne now remain in this place. We should burn every building above, and be gone.

"But where did they go?" Radu asked. "Are they dead? No, Wiglaf is with them. Could his wyrm open a doorway or lead them through the darkness?"

Brendan's children once collected gates, Azazel told Radu's mind, *and I cannot say what Wiglaf's wyrm might choose to do.* The dragon blister twisted beneath Radu Bey's skin, reversing course from counterclockwise to clockwise across his bare chest. Radu shivered at the sensation.

"You gathered thousands of souls before you could open me a portal into Babd Catha's tomb." Radu whipped the surface of the river with the chain dangling from his right wrist. Electricity danced between the links and across the water. "Does Wiglaf's soul passenger wield strength so far beyond your own, dragon? Was I a fool in my choosing?"

Azazel was silent.

"Answer me, serpent," Radu said. "Or I will cut you from my flesh, bind you in one of Solomon's cells, and seek another passenger."

The blister slowed beneath Radu's skin, thinning and fading until Azazel was quite still, like the ghost of a scar.

Nidhoggr is the greatest of all wyrms but one. He will devour the Scylthing in time…and then the world.

"Radu cel Frumos." Arachne's soft voice echoed through the tunnel, somehow louder than the moving water. "Collect your filth and leave this place."

Radu Bey spun around on the walkway, gripping his chains like whips.

Arachne stood no more than twenty yards behind him, just visible through a living tapestry of spider silk that spanned the tunnel from wall to wall above the river. The shapes of men and women and strange beasts moved in the silk as Radu Bey watched, all of them brightening and quickening while millions of spiders still worked. Woven in the silk beside Arachne, just above the water, the image of a winged bull flared its nostrils and preened enormous wings, glaring directly into Radu Bey's eyes. He had underestimated the spider girl, apparently.

"That has not been my name for many centuries," Radu said. "Those beasts cannot reach me. What do you think such an Angel weaving can accomplish?"

"Your undoing," Arachne said. "Or mine."

Cyrus did not know how long he had walked on dry stone through the water. He had lost track of how often he had awakened, curled up on his side in a dome of air surrounded by dark liquid. He was no longer unnerved by the tangled rugs of nautilus tentacles that seemed to travel alongside him. He had no hunger and no thirst. He had no sense of direction, and for a long while, he desired nothing more than to walk toward the deep fiery glow in the water.

Almost nothing more.

As the glow had grown closer, Cyrus had felt old desires grow in him. Desires he had pushed away to survive. He wanted to talk to his mother, to be with Antigone and Dan. He wanted to laugh with his father. With every step, he wanted these things more, with an intensity that cut him open, with a desire that burned in his soul like salt would in his eyes.

Cyrus wanted to pull his mother's shoulders tight under his arm and hold her close enough to smell the rain and the ocean wind in her dark hair. Cyrus wanted to see joy in his mother's eyes. He wanted Antigone to point at him with an outraged face, demanding his good behavior with false seriousness in her voice but a spark of amusement in her eyes. He wanted to sit beside his sister on a cliff overlooking the ocean and yearn together for a time when they did not ache at the loss of their father. He wanted to throw his arm around her and walk beside her, distributing her pain and his across their shoulders together. Cyrus wanted to hear Dan's voice, to know that he was alive, and that his heart was still beating strong. He wanted to swim with Dan, straight out into the California surf, letting the Pacific's deep cold tighten his belly while the sun warmed his shoulders. He wanted to huddle around a driftwood fire on the beach with the smell of lazy elephant seals on the breeze and listen to their father tell wild stories all three Smith kids had been sure were make believe. Cyrus wanted to see Dan young and dancing around the fire with a towel over his shoulders while their father sang of pirates and mushroom men and giant dragonflies.

Cyrus wanted to see Dan as he had been before care had crushed him and Phoenix had rebuilt him. He wanted to see what Dan would have become if their father had never been killed.

Like many mortals before him, Cyrus wanted to see what might have been. He wanted to know and savor every drop of what he had lost.

As Cyrus walked, the dark water receded around him. The stone was always dry beneath his tired feet. The liquid walls in his small pod always retreated from his touch. The fiery glow grew, but was no brighter than when Cyrus had begun walking…

Until Cyrus once again woke with no memory of having fallen asleep and found himself once more curled up on cold stone with the ground grinding pain into his left shoulder and his left hip.

Cyrus sat up slowly, leaning back on his hands.

The nautili were gone, leaving the water free of tentacles. And his little egg of air had hatched into something much larger. Cyrus was no longer in a pod with water walls just beyond his reach. He was now seated in a watery tunnel. Cyrus was the dead end, with water at his back and on both sides.

The other end of the tunnel was ablaze. Inside that tunnel, standing between Cyrus and an inferno, there was a girl with bare arms, wearing a simple white dress. If simple dresses could be made entirely of feather and pearl.

"Rise," the girl said. Her voice was quiet, like a candle flame.

Cyrus scrambled to his feet without thought. Defiance didn't even occur to him as a possibility.

The girl came closer on small feet as bare as her arms. Her hair was black and pulled back into a tight tower of braids on the back of her head. Her neck was long and slight, almost fragile beneath the sharpness of her jaw. Her skin was the color of clay, much the same as Quick's had been when Cyrus had met the boy in his Burial. And with the same heavy freckling. But the girl seemed much kinder than Quick. Maybe because she was a girl. Maybe because Cyrus didn't think she was about to turn into a lamb and cut her own throat. Quick had been far more unnerving. This girl, despite the setting, seemed like the kind of girl Cyrus would have had a crush on in school, a crush he would have absolutely denied to everyone. Especially Antigone. Even more especially himself.

Good thing there had never been a girl like her at school.

"I'm Cyrus," Cyrus said. "Cyrus Smith." His mind fog from all the timeless underwater wandering was lifting rapidly in the girl's presence. Time and space, hunger and weariness, were all reintroducing themselves as general concepts in his life.

"Yes. You are Cyrus." The girl's agreement was simple, supportive even, with a sweet upward tilt in her voice, like a teacher congratulating

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a small child on his spelling. "What are you carrying into this place, Cyrus Smith Brendanson?" The girl paused, with a twitch at the corner of her mouth. "Or perhaps I should ask what is carrying you?"

Cyrus blinked. *Nothing? Obviously. Trick question. Carrying him? What was that supposed to mean?*

Cyrus cleared his throat, grimaced at what lurched up between his tonsils, and immediately looked around for a place to spit. He hated that kind of inverted, deep, thinky speak. Nolan had always done it whenever he was trying to make Cyrus smarter. *Don't try to work out what the Latin means in English, work out what the Latin means in Latin…*

The girl burst out laughing, a cheerful crackling laugher from deep inside her, more campfire than tinkling bells. Cyrus knew she was laughing at him, but he couldn't stop himself from smiling, even with a gob of throat scum tucked in his cheek.

"Nikales was patient with you, I think," the girl said. "You may spit in the water."

Cyrus spat into the liquid wall on his right and grinned more freely. "Nolan?" he asked. "Patient? Hardly. He gave me more scars than anyone. By the way, can you tell me how to get out of here? Without walking back, I mean. That was long. I'm hoping for more of a shortcut. And there's an angry pirate back there I'd like to avoid."

"Edward Teach," the girl said. "One ninth of him. There is only one way out of this place, Cyrus Smith. Even you could not return the way you came."

"What do you mean, 'even' me?" Cyrus asked.

The girl smiled again, a smile like Antigone's when she was watching something awkward or confused—a puppy stuck in a box or a cat falling off a couch or…Dennis Gilly in his bowler hat worrying about rules.

"You think I'm stupid," Cyrus said. For some reason, he didn't feel at all insulted, he just recognized the expression on the girl's face.

"I do not think," the girl answered. "And you have not answered my question, so I will not address yours."

Turning around, she began to retrace her steps back down the glowing tunnel.

Cyrus followed her into the tunnel, uninvited.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Again," she answered, "you have not answered my question."

"I don't remember what it was," Cyrus said. "And don't you know all the answers already?"

"Many of them," the girl said. "But I will hear the words from your mouth and witness truth on your tongue."

The girl had reached the other end of the tunnel. Stepping out into a wide throne room, she turned to face Cyrus.

Cyrus stepped out of the tunnel, and for the first time since the girl had appeared, his eyes left her.

He heard the tunnel slurp shut behind him, but he did not so much as glance back.

The room was not much larger than the outer chamber Cyrus's Uncle, Hanno, had led him into on the other side of the water. In this room, the rear wall was also liquid, but liquid flame, curling and twisting in on itself where it stood flat and upright, birthing and breeding impossible colors in fast-dying tongues and veins. Deep blues and greens and reds were pursued and devoured by whites and yellows hotter than the noonday sun.

Three very different thrones sat on three platforms in front of the fire wall. Beneath the seats of the mismatched thrones, there were identical black, stone cubes, bearing no decoration. Each held a single keyhole.

"What tokens do you carry, Cyrus Smith?" the girl asked. "What does the mortal bring with him into the King's Deep Gehenna?"

"Um," Cyrus said, finally looking away from the wall of fire and refocusing on the girl. In the intensity of the light, she now seemed to him both smaller and more fierce. The feathers of her dress could have been from any barnyard goose when she'd been in the tunnel. In here, each feather was tinged with flame, like the feathers of a phoenix.

"You live here all the time?" Cyus asked. "Like in a Burial? Do you ever leave? I mean, sorry, I'm carrying a patrik. Patricia. And two keys. Solomon keys. They opened the water wall."

The girl stared at Cyrus. Her eyes were volcanic, as if a teacher far from happy with his spelling.

Cyrus stared back for as long as he could. Three seconds. Four. And then he bit his lower lip and looked back at the wall and the thrones.

"Cyrus Smith," the girl said, and her voice had hardened, shivering the stone beneath Cyrus's feet and sending ripples through the wall of flame. "The truth must be spoken here. All of it."

Cyrus swallowed. "Okay. Right. I wasn't trying to lie, by the way. I really wasn't. It's just habit. I've also got the Dragon's Tooth. The Reaper's Blade or whatever you would call it. Solomon's Fang? That's how I killed the transmortals on the other side. Not all of them. But a good start."

"Good," the girl said. "But not everything."

Cyrus reached for the keyring on his wrist. "What do you mean? Oh." His hand closed around the hinged but empty silver tooth sheath. And the other two charms.

"A piece of wood," Cyrus said. "Petrified, I think. And a pearl thing in a little silver claw."

"A piece of wood," the girl repeated, stepping toward him. "And a pearl thing. You, Cyrus Smith, are no poet."

Cyrus smiled, pleased. It felt like a compliment.

"That's it," he said. "That's everything. Can you tell me your name now?"

Once again, the girl laughed. "You should not surprise me, Cyrus Smith. And yet, you do. I have many names. You may call me Binah. To many, I have been Chokmah. William Skelton, when he stood where you stand, called me Sophia."

"Skelton?" Cyrus asked. "Billy Bones was here?"

"Why does this surprise you?" Binah asked. "Skelton gave you those charms and those keys. The keys have many uses but were forged by the king for these locks above all others. The pearl gave you passage through the deep, unharmed by the guardians."

"The pearl did that?" Cyrus asked. "How?"

"How does the moon command the sea?" Binah asked. "It is a shard of the same power, seeded in a pearl by the king who built this prison. The wood charm you hold was taken from the tree of truth in the first garden. It is the most powerful of anything you hold. With it, you may be seated in one of these three thrones. Which one you choose will also choose your end."

Cyrus focused his attention on the thrones. The throne on the left was on the lowest platform and carved of dark wood, heavy and simple, with thick planks and gentle curves in the arms and back. The central throne was on a higher platform. It shared bones of the same wood, but the arms and back were encrusted with gold and silver. The throne on the right was seated on the highest platform. Again, the same wood had been used. But on this throne, the arms and back were horned with iron.

"Like the great creatures banished beyond the flames," Binah said, "and the lesser creatures who were once bound in glass spheres in the water, these thrones were banished from the world of men, and I have

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been their keeper. Like the wood you hold, all were carved from the tree of the first curse. All bring the knowledge of good and evil."

"How are they different?" Cyrus asked.

"The lowest seat brings wisdom," Binah said. "Knowledge of what is and was still could be. The throne of gold brings knowledge of great wealth. Knowledge of tombs and hordes and powers yet hidden from man. The iron seat opens the eyes to power. One who sits in it sees every path to every throne in every nation—stratagems and weaknesses, the levers to humble ever nation. Alexander sat in that seat. Many have sought it. Few have ruled it."

"So, if I want to beat the transmortals and Phoenix," Cyrus said, "and I have no idea how to do it, the iron one would be the right seat?"

"It would show you paths to conquest in any earthly war," Binah said, "whether those paths be blessed or cursed."

"I'm guessing Skelton sat in the gold one," Cyrus said. "Based on the map he left us. And it didn't exactly work out for him. Seems like iron, but you tell me. You know my situation, apparently. I'm supposedly going to smash the Ordo Draconis. Which one do I sit in?"

Binah was silent.

"But it's never the obvious one, right?" Cyrus said. "In stories, it's always the one people skip over." He sniffed and walked toward the simple wooden throne, bending over to study it as best he could without stepping onto the platform. Up close, it was more intricately carved than Cyrus had first realized.

"If this one goes wrong," he said, "what happens?"

"For a mortal? It may shatter your soul and leave your heart in ruins," Binah said.

"Whoa," Cyrus said, "not what I was expecting. How?"

"By revealing the roads untraveled, sorrows unchosen, fruit uneaten, brokenness avoided, loves won, and loves lost. All men desire to see the future. Few can stomach it. Even fewer have the wisdom to look not at the future from the present, but at the present from the future. There is a reason the tree was forbidden for the first father."

"So, this one will be a bummer," Cyrus said. "For sure. Skipping the gold one, because I don't want to turn into Skelton and gold won't really help me right now, what goes wrong in the iron throne?"

Binah and Cyrus approached the iron throne, stopping just in front of the platform.

"You may see that Radu Bey and the transmortals cannot be defeated without evil of your own. You may see that righteousness cannot triumph in this struggle until the world ends and that all of your family and your loved ones will be tortured and slain unless you become like the dragons yourself. You may see compromises and sacrifices that will grant your arm victory and your soul defeat. The darkness may become tempting."

Cyrus chewed on his lip.

"These are the dangers," Binah said. "I cannot tell you more. You must choose. And when you have chosen, you must leave, and you may never return."

"Have you sat in them?" Cyrus asked.

"I made them," Binah said. "My sight is in all three always. I have seen every version of your life, Cyrus Smith Brendanson. I have seen you damned, and I have seen you glorified. And I will see it all again tomorrow."

"Right," Cyrus said, and he climbed the platform to the wooden throne. "That's super encouraging. What are the keystones for under the seats?"

"Each throne is a doorway into the prisons of fire beyond. They must not be opened."

"Fine by me," Cyrus said, sitting down on the broad, wooden throne. "Can we—"

As his hands gripped the arms and his rear hit the seat, Binah and the chamber of fire vanished.

Cyrus was seated at a small table in a kitchen in California.

His mother and father sat across from him, both smiling, both with gray shot through their hair and wrinkles clustered at their smiling eyes.

Both of them were talking baby talk.

Confused, Cyrus looked at his hands. He was holding a jar of mushy peaches in his left hand and a tiny baby spoon in his right. Infant twins, a boy and a girl, sat in high-chairs beside him. Both with ruddy cheeks and ruddy hair and golden-green eyes.

"Cy," his father said. "I have to say, I never pictured you with redheaded kids. But then I never thought you'd end up with a Boone."

"Lawrence Smith!" Diana said, entering the room, shaking two bottles. "It's called auburn! They aren't redheads. Not that we'd mind, would we, Cy?"

Cyrus blinked, and the vision was gone. He was on his knees on wet ground rooting through ferns and moss. A huge cedar groaned in the wind above him, but he wasn't paying mind. What he had just seen was still eating at him. Somehow there had been a possible version of the world in which his father hadn't died, and he and Diana had ended up together. With twins. How was that even possible? And whose choices had destroyed that future? His dad's? Rupert's?

Distracted, his hands kept clawing at the ferns until his fingers had hit granite, bending his fingernails backward.

He cleared the moss and earth off a small square stone. A message had been engraved in the top.

HERE FELL ANTIGONE SMITH

"No!" Cyrus yelled. "No!"

Hands pulled Cyrus back from the stone and up to his feet.

"I found Diana's over there," Oliver Laughlin said. "And Rupert's."

Cyrus blinked and was gone.

He was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the great Galleria of Ashtown. Radu Bey was seated across from him.

"What do you need?" Cyrus asked. "To leave us Ashtown and never come back?"

"Open the Burials," Radu Bey said.

"Already done," said Cyrus.

"Rupert's body," Radu said.

"Done," said Cyrus.

"And a marriage," Radu said. "Between our lines."

"What are you talking about?" Cyrus said. "You can't be serious."

"Your sister," said Radu Bey. "Or be destroyed."

Cyrus…

His name written in flame on a burning leaf floated past his face.

Cyrus spun around. Pythia was standing behind him, with her ropes of hair bundled back and her face exposed. She looked quite a bit like Binah.

"This is not the real," Pythia said. "See *is*, not *might be*."

"Where's Dan?" Cyrus asked. "Why isn't he here?"

"He is shooting fliers," Pythia said.

Cyrus nodded, as if this made perfect sense to him.

"We may die soon," Pythia said. "But you sit in wisdom's seat. Let us walk together."

Without a flicker, Cyrus was back beneath the groaning cedar, clawing at the earth.

There was no carved stone.

IS floating by in burning letters.

Cyrus looked up. Ferns were trampled everywhere. The ashes of a bonfire were still smoking. In the center of the ashes, a large, empty picture frame had been bound upright between two stakes. While Cyrus watched, a disembodied black hand with a leather sleeve emerged from the picture frame holding a torch. The hand used the flame to light the frame on fire.

"Rupe?" Cyrus said. "Wait! Rupe!"

Pythia grabbed Cyrus by the hand and the scene was gone.

"Enemies," Pythia said. "We must walk on. Learn weaknesses."

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Antigone shrugged her pack off into the dry grass and began to strip off her jacket. The heat was intense, but not as intense as she had expected, to be honest. Probably due to the elevation. They appeared to be on top of a significant cliff, overlooking miles of brown and green savannah. All around her, the others were following her lead, adjusting packs and clothing.

Right beside Antigone, Wiglaf, also overdressed in his heavy wool sweater and leather kilt, crossed his arms and squinted at the horizon. Even his beard seemed inappropriate in the heat.

"So how sure are we that this is our world again?" Antigone asked the big Swede. "But even if it isn't, I already like it better."

Without looking, Wiglaf pointed behind him.

Antigone twisted around. Across a small lake, crowning a rock promontory above a large sand dune, there was a four-story manor house like something out of the English countryside.

A small seaplane bobbed in the muddy lake, tied to a dock. Four men emerged from the house, all carrying rifles.

A laugh burst out of Antigone uninvited, accompanied by hot tears.

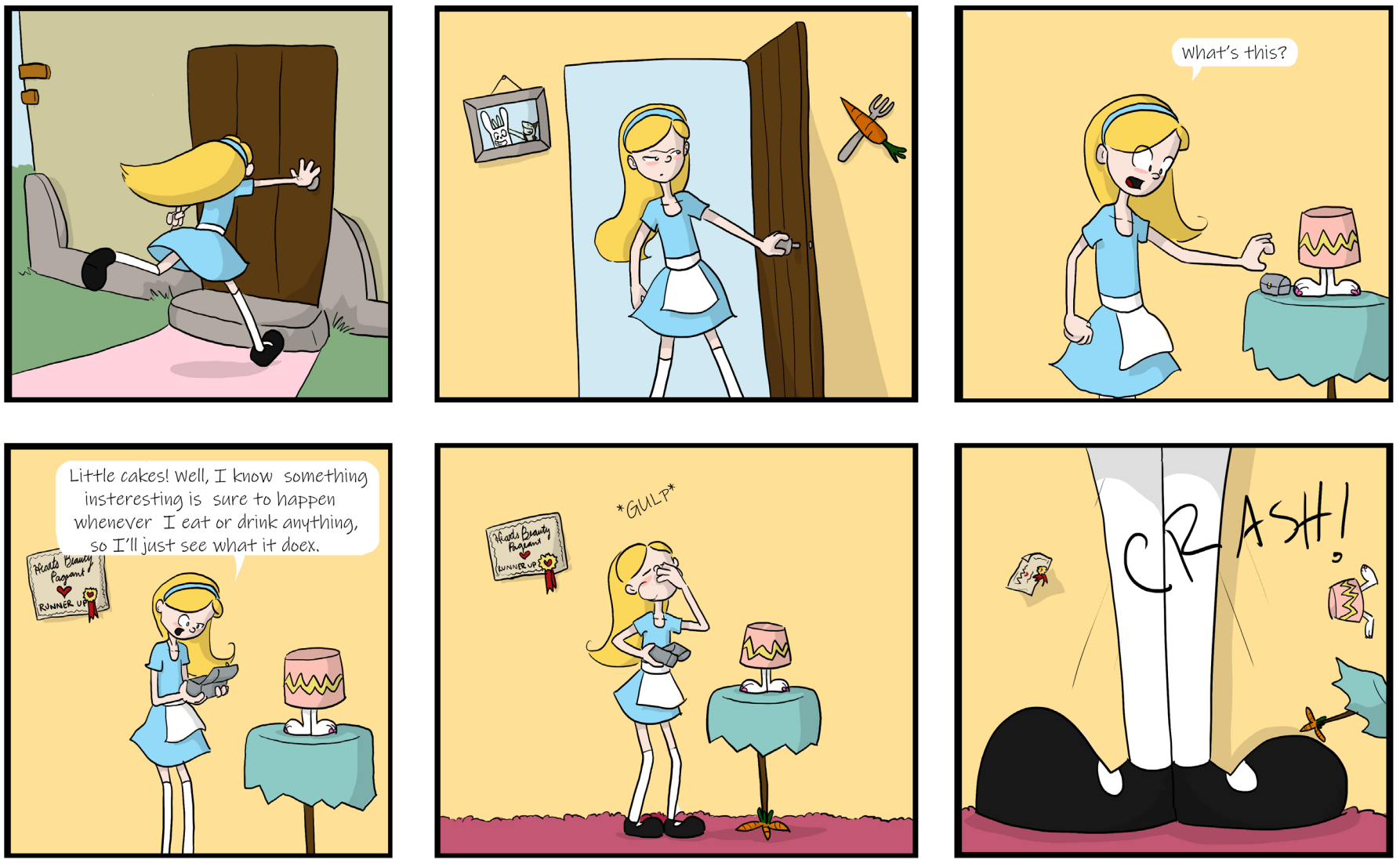
Antigone wiped her cheeks quickly as Wiglaf smiled. She had never been so happy to see men with guns in her life.

END OF CHAPTER 8 ✵

THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN


What's this?
Little cakes! Well, I know something insteresting is sure to happen whenever I eat or drink anything, so I'll just see what it doex.
Hearts Beauty Pageant
RUNNER UP
GULP
CRASH!
Oh dear! I hope I shan't grow any more... as it is, I can't get out the door! I do wish I hadn't eaten as much!

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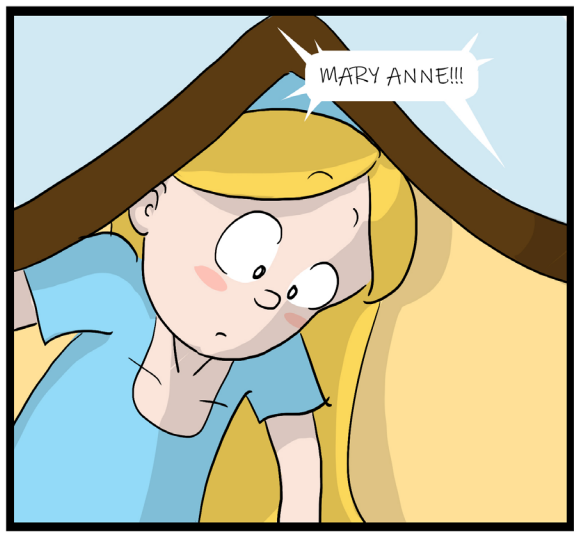
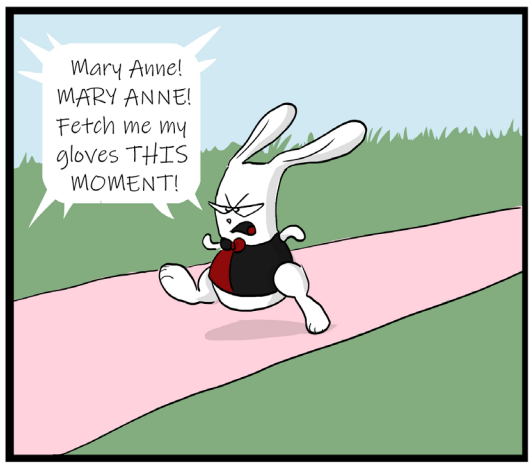
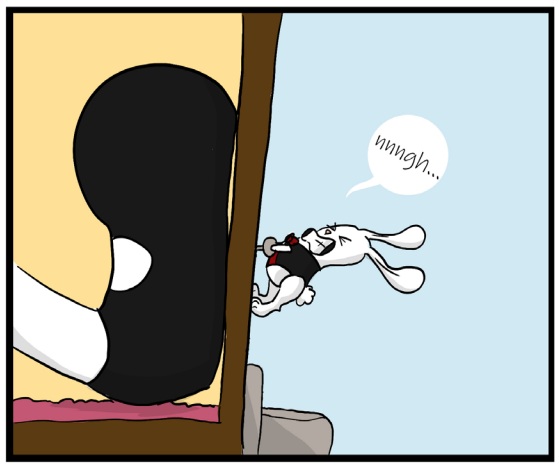
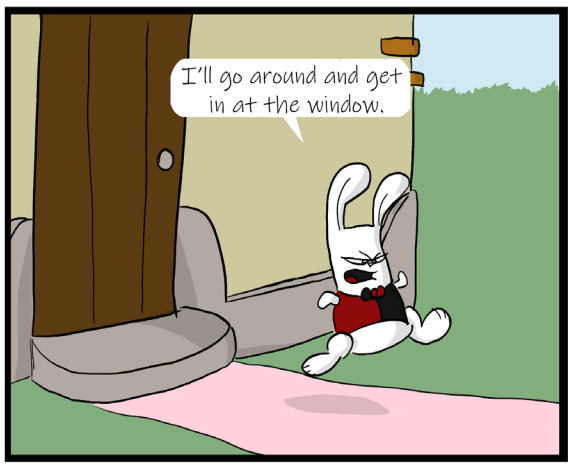
It was much pleasanter at home, when one wasn't always growing larger and smaller and being ordered about by mice and rabbits! I almost wish I hadn't come down the hole at all!

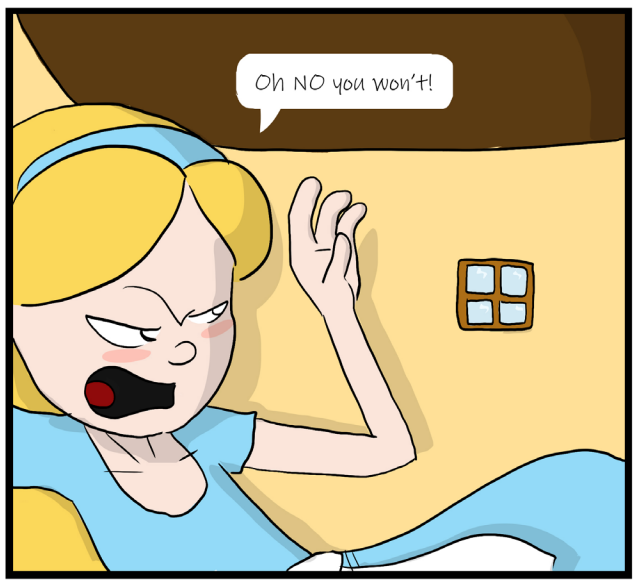
When I read fairy tales, I fancied this sort of thing didn't happen and now I'm in the middle of one! Someone ought to write a book about me. Maybe I shall when I grow up.
But I AM grown up! At least, there isn't any more ROOM for me to grow up here!

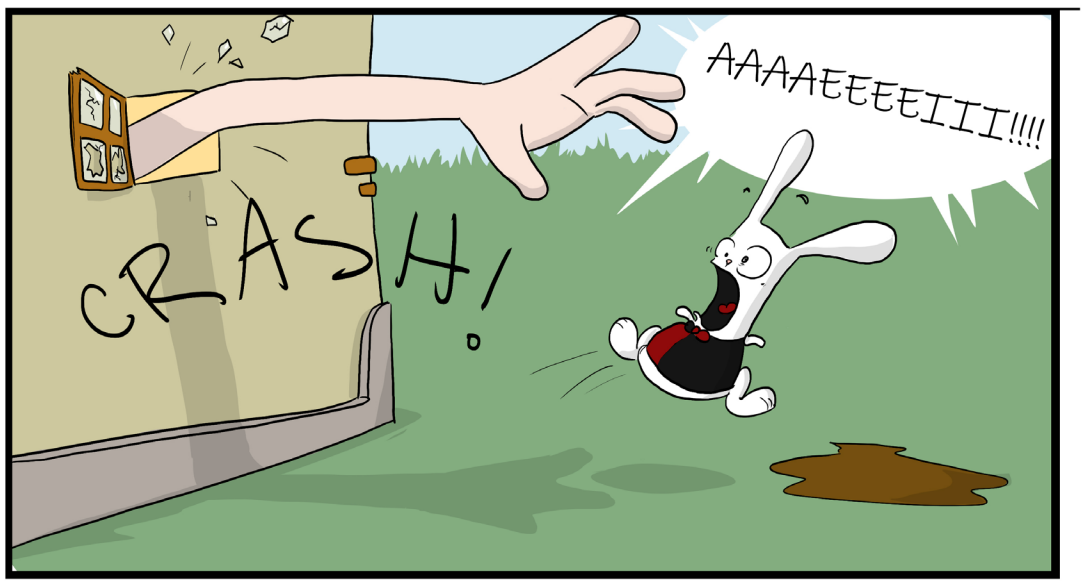


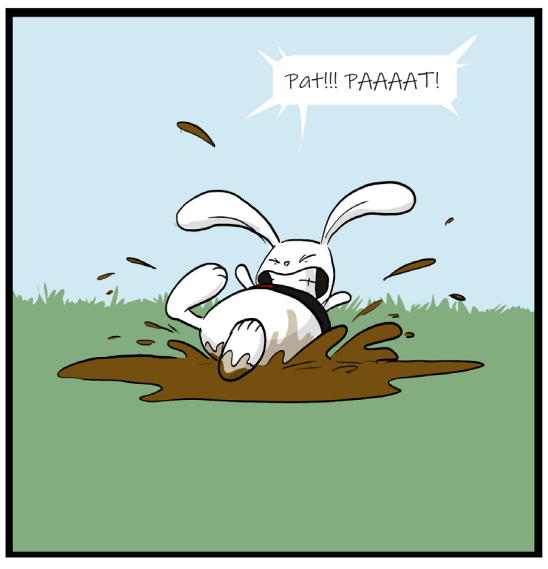


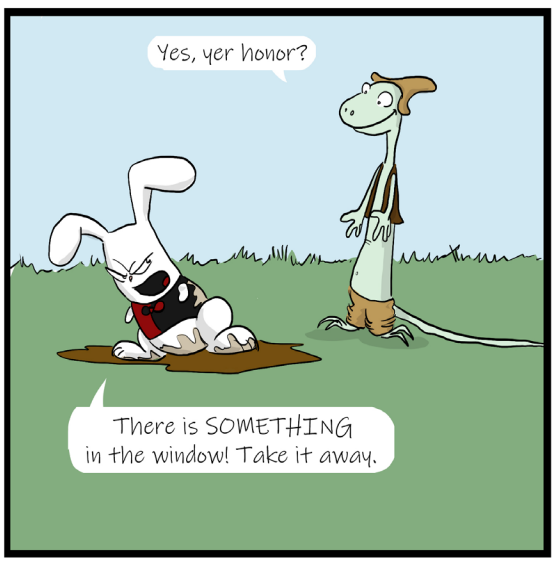












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CHAPTER 10

THE SILENT BELLS OF ASHTOWN BURIALS

BOOK IN THE NEW ORDER OF NINE BRENDAS

SERIAL EDITION

CHAPTER 10

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

N.D. WILSON

11

UNWELCOME HEIR

A HORIZONTAL BAR OF SEARING LIGHT, LIKE WINGS on the sun, spread across the entire western horizon. The intense glare hid the specifics of the sprawling landscape from Antigone's eyes—the glare, and the sheer volume of stinging sweat spilling down through her eyebrows. Antigone could make out the oddly English manor house looming up ahead, but if someone had asked her to count the chimneys, she would have given up after the four big ones. Antigone could still make out the armed men, stationed like a barricade between the lake and the big house. They weren't pointing their rifles at her, but given the readiness in their stances, it felt like a real possibility.

By the time Rupert had led the group all the way around the small lake and the row of armed men had come into sharper focus, Antigone felt like dropped ice cream melting on August asphalt. Sweat was flowing freely down the back of her legs, always pausing in the pit of her knees before spilling down into her tall boots. Her thick socks were now soggy with her own pooling ooze. Her back was a swamp beneath her pack, and beside her, Diana Boone stood with her tan, freckled face somehow tastefully flushed and glowing.

While Antigone watched, Diana puffed a loose strand of hair out of her face.

"Beyond hot," Antigone said, tucking her own damp hair behind her ears.

"You get used it," Diana said. "This kind of heat feels like an old friend to me now. For a little while."

"An old friend?" Antigone said. "You're lying. Not possible."

Up in front, Rupert stopped, as did the rest of the small caravan behind him…except for Antigone. Diana grabbed her arm just before she collided with Dennis Gilly's pack.

Diana smiled. "Familiarity. Repetition. Association with joy. Some of my happiest memories are on this continent and in this sticky heat."

Antigone didn't answer. Rupert was shedding his packs, revealing oceans of sweat on the back of his safari shirt. At least Antigone wasn't alone.

"Have you been here exactly?" Antione asked.

"No," Diana said. "Not even sure where 'here exactly' is." Diana turned around, squinting at the sun. "I'd have to see the sunset to know exactly, but we're obviously sub-Saharan. Still north of the equator, though."

Antigone laughed. "Well, obviously."

Diana smiled.

A slender white man wearing a gray billed hat with a long neck flap at the back stepped out in front of the line of armed men. He held a large rifled pointed at Rupert's feet. Along with his hat, the man was wearing what looked like a gray bulletproof vest over a shirt and tie. His white trousers were creased so sharply in the front that his legs looked like scissors.

"Trespassers are not tolerated in this place," he said. His accent was clipped and lived in his sinuses, sounding something very close to British. "For your sakes, I do wish it were otherwise, but I'm afraid you really must about face and be off. Back from whence you came if you please, wherever that may be."

Rupert unslung his rifle, letting it rest gently in the crook of his arm. "My name is Rupert Greeves. You may know me as Blood Avenger of the Order of Brendan. I am no trespasser. This ground has been in stewardship trust since 1838, but it belongs to the O of B."

The armed men exchanged curious looks up and down their line. Some of them were quite old, sporting large woolly sideburns and moustaches. The majority wore blue and silver neckties beneath gray combat vests like their young leader, but a few were dressed in coveralls, more like gardeners or mechanics. The young leader bit his lip and then glanced back at the upper windows of the house behind him.

"I am afraid this is a rather bad time," The young man said.

How old was he? Antigone wondered. Nineteen? Twenty-one would be hard to believe.

"The Avengel of Brendan has no business here," one of the older men growled. He was jowly but fit, with broad sloping shoulders. As if

for punctuation, he rearranged the significant curl in his gray moustache after speaking. "And as for ownership, the O of B is nothing to us and has no claim in any court of law."

"Don't you just love a twirly moustache," Diana whispered to Antigone. "So understated. Not cliché at all."

Antigone swallowed back a laugh, but not completely. It rattled in her forehead and emerged into the silence as a snort.

It was Diana's turn to fight a laugh. Rupert looked back at them both. The twitch in his jaw and the hard stillness in his eyes pushed any temptation for further laughter far, far away from Antigone.

"Shall we do this like proper men of Brendan, then?" Rupert asked, turning back to the young man. "So as to eliminate confusion?" He cleared his throat. "I, Rupert Greeves, Blood Avenger of the Order of Brendan, Ashtown Estate, do now require the full and free use of these stewarded lands and this house, her beds, her barrels, and her baths, such as they may be, as is my right and within my power in the pursuit of my duties and in the keeping of my oaths." Rupert smiled. "If you need a signed voucher, I will also require a pen."

The young man coughed. Pulling off his cap, he wiped his forehead on the back of his sleeve.

"We, uh, well," the young man said. "That is interesting. And, uh, well, archaic is a word that might suit. We have not been active in Brendan's Order for some time now, as my uncle just pointed out. Some lifetimes, actually. I wasn't sure the order still existed."

"And yet," Rupert said. "The bill comes due, bruv. As bills always do."

"And who will be collecting?" The older man snarled. "You?" He pointed at Dennis, Antigone, and Diana, followed by Niffy and Wiglaf. "I see hungry children, a dubious monk, and a few pounds of blond muscle, but no one a bullet can't stop."

Nolan laughed out loud and began moving toward the front of the caravan.

"Oh, friend," Nolan said. "You have no idea."

The jowly man sniffed loudly and readied his rifle. No moustache twirl this time. Antigone was disappointed.

Rupert held out a hand, stopping Nolan in his tracks.

"If theft and resistance is the path you choose," Rupert said, "tonight will see you sleeping in graves. The Order is at war, and the Blood Avenger is in the field. The rule of law is martial. There will be no trials."

"Impudence," the jowly man said. "Mother will not hear of this, Reggie."

"Uncle Theodorus, if you don't mind," the young man said. "Hostility isn't helping. I will deal with this."

"Indeed, Uncle Dorus," Rupert said. "Your mother's poor hearing has less than nothing to do with this situation."

"And if we decline until we can review your claims?" the young man asked.

"You do not decline," Rupert said. "You occupy this house and steward these grounds at the pleasure of the O of B. This place does not belong to you. Generations may have passed, but you have no more authority in this place than house-sitters. It is within both my authority and my ability to terminate your position here immediately."

Setting his packs down in the dry grass, Niffy moved forward, positioning himself on Rupert's right. He, at least, was sweating more than Antigone. He looked like a man fresh out of the shower. And his monk's robe was a poor towel.

"Believe him, lad," Niffy said. "You and your necktie brigade won't last any longer than a sip of tea against this crew."

"Wait here, please," the young man said, backing away.

"Regretfully," Rupert said, "no." Picking up his packs, he walked directly toward the older man with the twirly moustache.

"Stop," Theodorus growled. "No, sir. Step back immediately!"

Rupert handed the man one of this packs. "Would you mind?" He looked down the nervous row of well-dressed riflemen. "The others will need assistance as well. As for you, Reggie," he said pointing at the young leader. "Let us go meet with Mother, shall we? Antigone! Wiglaf! With me, please!" Rupert grinned back over his shoulder at Antigone. "A little infamy may be helpful."

Cyrus Smith watched his sister and Rupert Greeves and a huge blond man in a leather kilt walk up the slope toward the stone manor house while the others handed packs to riflemen. Pythia was standing next to him, her hair slowly moving like living rope, twisting in the air behind her.

"This is real?" Cyrus asked. "No. It can't be. I saw Rupert die. They were killing him. The transmortals pinned him to a door.

"Rupert has tasted death. But this is the now," Pythia said. "Unchangeable."

Cyrus opened his mouth and then closed it again quickly. He couldn't remember ever crying in a dream, if that's what this was, and he didn't want to start now. He wasn't sure when he'd last cried outside of a dream either.

Rupert Greeves was still above ground. Still in the fight. And with Antigone and Diana and every other survivor of the battle at Ashtown—George, Silas, Dennis, Hillary, Niffy, Sterling, Jeb…

"Where's Alan?" Cyrus asked.

"He is why they still live," Pythia answered. "Although he does not."

Cyrus nodded. He knew grief should be hitting him, but he'd been expecting more death. More absences. As sad as he was for George and Silas, it was tempered with relief for everyone else. Weeks in the jungle had given him plenty of time to review the state things had been in when he had pursued Azazel through the dragon's tunnels and portals

"I like it when you talk more, by the way," Cyrus said. "It's actually helpful. Not like burning one-word riddles on leaves. What is this place and why are they here?"

Pythia's hair sprung straight back from her head as rigid and stiff as tree branches. Her big dark eyes became as still as stones. Cyrus leaned forward, trying to catch her gaze. After a moment, he nudged her arm.

"Pythia?" he asked. "Pythia, are you okay? What's going on?"

Pythia dropped into a low crouch on bare feet, and her hair writhed forward around her, swallowing her in its nest.

A single, smoking leaf floated out into the air while fiery letters consumed it.

RUDE!

"Oh, come on," Cyrus said. "What did I say?"

"You know what you said, Cyrus."

The deep voice was as familiar to Cyrus as his own. Forgetting Pythia and the scene playing out in front of the manor, Cyrus spun around.

Daniel Smith stood behind him.

"Dan?" Cyrus asked. "Is this real? Are you really here?"

Dan laughed. "As really here as you are. Very soon, I will wake on

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a steel deck with burns on my arms and blisters on my hands and salt in my eyes. Phoenix found our boat. But Lemon had long ago prepared for the worst. We'll need to move somewhere else, and soon, but we aren't dead yet. I passed out and followed Pythia here. I shouldn't stay long." He reached out for Cyrus's hand and then pulled his little brother into a hug. "Where are you?" Dan asked. "And when did you learn to dream walk?"

"I still don't know how," Cyrus said. "I'm way underground, I think. Sitting in Solomon's—"

Do not speak of it. The voice in Cyrus's head belonged to the girl, Binah. *Not even to blood*, she added. Or be fed to the guardians.

Pythia's hair rippled apart, and she looked up at Cyrus as Dan released him. Her startled eyes made it clear that she had heard the voice as well.

"Binah," Pythia said, "Priestess, he cannot betray what I have already seen."

Do not speak of the thrones…

"It would have been nice to know the rules beforehand," Cyrus said aloud. "Anything else gonna get me killed?"

"What's going on?" Dan asked, looking around. "And what is this place?"

"An ancient seat," Pythia said. "A seat Rupert seeks to make new…when silent bells ring."

"Perfect," Dan said. "Pyth riddles. My favorite."

Pythia pointed an angry grimace at Dan, but there was a smile beneath it. Dan laughed.

"Joke!" Dan said. "And don't let Cy's rudeness get to you. He'll learn."

Pythia's grimace vanished, replaced with a wide, easy smile, more relaxed than any he had ever seen on her. Pythia's hair wound itself into a bundle and then twisted into a towering beehive crown on top of her head, revealing the delicate lines of her dark neck and the sharp shelf of her jaw.

Cyrus looked back and forth between his brother and the little rope-haired seer, unsure that he could possibly be sensing what he knew that he was sensing.

His brother and Pythia? Even a good transmortal was hard to imagine as a suitable match for any mortal anywhere. That would be like him falling for Arachne. Or Antigone dating Nolan. And Pythia, as good and kind as she had always been toward Cyrus, was also a little…

Another fiery leaf floated from Pythia's hands and drifted past Cyrus's face.

CRAZY?

Cyrus coughed in surprise and turned to face Pythia. He had forgotten how much she could dig into his mind. Especially in a vision or dream. Cyrus tried to quickly focus and control his thoughts. Pythia was staring straight up at him, questioning brown eyes wide beneath a smooth, untroubled brow.

"Crazy?" Dan asked. "Will one of you tell me what we're talking about? Cy? Pythia?"

Listen, Cyrus thought. *I like you. It's nothing against you. You're great. It's just…surprising. To think about. That's all.*

Pythia smiled and dropped her head. Her hair closed around her face before rippling back up again.

"Excuse me," Dan said, punching Cyrus in the shoulder. "It's nice to see you, Cy, but this is getting annoying."

"Cyrus must go while he can," Pythia said. Stepping forward, she placed both of her hands, palms flat on Cyrus's chest, as if about to push him out of the vision. "Your sister lives. Your brother lives. Rupert lives. Your heart need not break. There are now more important things for you to learn."

"Hold up," Cyrus said. "Not yet."

"Radu Bey has weaknesses," Pythia said. "Learn them. Phoenix crafts schemes. Discover them."

"Sure," Cyrus said. "But I need to see Tigs for a minute. I'll leave soon. I promise."

Cyrus turned to jog away toward the manor house. Hesitating, he glanced back.

"If a transmortal and a mortal have kids, which are they?"

Dan made a sound like he was choking on his tongue.

"Mortal," Pythia said. "Even with two transmortal parents, children are born mortal."

"Where did that question come from?" Dan asked.

"Just curious," Cyrus said, grinning. "And you're welcome, by the way. Now you never have to ask!"

Cyrus didn't even try to hide his laughter as he ran.

Rupert, Antigone, and the big, bearded blond with the leather kilt had been inside the manor house for more than a minute by the time Cyrus reached the front door. Between two armed guards dressed in white suits, Cyrus assessed the situation. The door was made of huge timbers with a grain he did not recognize, all bound together with iron straps and hanging on iron hinges that were as wide as his thighs. An iron bull elephant head was mounted in the center of the door, holding a large black ring in its curled trunk.

Cyrus tried to pull it.

Cyrus failed.

Even leaning back and pulling with both hands, he barely managed to swing the ring a millimeter. But why did he need to open it at all? The door was real, hanging in a large stone arch somewhere in Africa, while Cyrus's body was actually seated on a wooden throne in a secret chamber beneath a mountain across an ocean in South America.

What were the physical rules for exploring visions while seated in Solomon's Throne?

Cyrus closed his eyes and held his breath, hoping he didn't break his nose with his next attempt. With no confidence at all, Cyrus stepped into the timbers.

The sensation of sliding through the door left his skin tingling, but was no more violent than stepping out of heat and into cold anywhere else in the world. Apparently, wandering around in a vision of the real was more like being a ghost in the real.

The entryway was tiled with wide stone pavers, each inlaid with a carved ram's head in its center. Beyond the stone floor, a wooden checkerboard floor stretched away through an arched hallway toward a wall of mullioned windows in the back of the house. To Cyrus's left, an oversize stairway climbed out of sight.

The walls were entirely of wood, almost as black as piano keys, and carved with thousands of leaves and animals heads. Golden chandeliers, holding bulbs inside crystal globes, punctuated the beamed ceiling.

Through the windows at the rear of the house, Cyrus could see a sprawling stone ruin, the size of a small city. Beyond the ruin, a scattered population of scrub trees, shaped into harsh angles by wind and heat, dotted a long valley that stretched all the way to distant mountains which lined the horizon with hazy layers like monstrous teeth.

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Somewhere, a grandfather clock was tocking loudly. Heavy footsteps popped and creaked on the ceiling above Cyrus's head. *Too loud to be Tigs*, Cyrus thought. *Loud even for Rupe.*

The bearded blond. He was easily Gilgamesh size. Probably heavy enough to make a concrete floor creak.

As interested at Cyrus was in the ruined stone city behind the house, he made for the stairs.

Binah? Cyrus thought. *You here?*

As required, the girl's voice replied.

When I'm done here… Cyrus thought. *How do I go places?*

She did not answer.

Upstairs, Cyrus found his sister and Rupert and Wiglaf in a large sitting room at the rear of the house. Wide bay windows overlooked the ruins below, and Antigone stood close to the glass, looking down. Wiglaf was seated on a small couch with his long legs stretched out on a Persian carpet. Rupert stood facing an old, doughy-faced woman wrapped in blankets inside a basket swing suspended from the ceiling.

"The Order has nothing to do with us," the old woman said. "We have enough troubles of our own. Without us, this house would have been burned and the tombs ransacked a thousand times."

"And we thank you for doing your duty," Rupert said. "However, this place does not belong to you."

Cyrus moved past Rupert to stand next to his sister at the window. Below them, large stone walls, some almost intact, enclosed a maze of dry, grassy streets and roofless buildings. A single bell tower still stood in the very center of the ruins. Unlike the rest of the place, not one stone was missing in its face, in its domed roof, or in the columns of the open belfry at the top.

"Hey, Tigs," Cyrus said. "I wish you could hear me."

Antigone leaned closer to the window, squinting.

"My people may be sheltering in this place for some time," Rupert said. "The resource may have been left dormant for generations, but we are in need of it now. And, I'm afraid it is not a discussion."

"I was born in this house," the old woman said. "My father never allowed strangers. My grandfather never tolerated strangers. And I will not be the one—"

"Where is the Kandake?" Rupert interupted.

"Excuse me?" the woman asked.

"This place was first built by the Order to preserve the ancient lineage of the Kandake. Your stewardship was established to preserve and protect the Kandake in exile. Have you failed?"

"I was told the old stories. The tombs have not been disturbed," the woman said. "I knew them all well when I was a girl. The last of the Kandake are all there."

"All? Really?" Rupert asked. "Why lie to me? Were you the one who drove her away? You are the correct age." Cyrus heard the hardness in his voice. He turned around in time to see Rupert drop into a crouch in front of the old woman in her creaking swing.

"She left of her own will," the old woman said, weakly. "We could not have stopped her."

"No doubt," Rupert said. "But why was that her greatest desire? You could have served her, as the blood oath of your ancestors demanded. Instead, you treated her as your servant. The stewards demanded service of the one who was their queen."

The old woman squirmed in her blankets. Reggie reached for Rupert's shoulder, but the big man brushed it away and leaned forward, still crouching.

"Look at me, Hilde," Rupert said. "I was young when my mother died, but I never forgot the story of her escape from this place. Today, the heir returns. And neither I nor the Order of Brendan have further need of your family's stewardship. It has come to an end."

"I'm sorry," Reggie said. "Grandmother, what is happening?"

Wiglaf rose to his feet, nearly grazing his head on the ceiling's beams. "The monk should begin," he said. "The reconsecration may not be swift, and the bells should ring by sundown."

"What bells?" Antigone asked. "Why?"

"In the tower of Prester John outside," Rupert said. "So that this estate can replace Ashtown as the seat of Brendan. So the O of B can remain…at least until the next battle."

"I do not understand any of this," Reggie said.

"You do not need to understand," Rupert answered. "But you will need to pack."

Rupert rose from his crouch as Wiglaf strode from the room.

"Forgive me," Hilde muttered into her blankets. "I did not mean harm. She was…she was proud. The way she stood. And walked."

"She was a queen," Rupert answered. "And I cannot forgive what was not done to me."

Cyrus badly wanted to talk to Antigone, to discuss everything they had just seen and heard. Rupert was the son of a queen?

Cyrus reached for his sister, instinctively trying to get her attention.

Antigone shivered and flinched away at this touch. And in a flash the entire scene was gone. He was standing in the same room, but the walls were on fire. Charred and torn bodies—Rupert, Antigone, Dianna, and Niffy—were strewn across the carpet.

Bells were ringing in the tower outside.

Cyrus jerked, opening his eyes, and discovered that he was gripping the arms of the wooden throne tight. Binah, all feathers and pearl and towering hair, stood just in front of him.

"That last part wasn't true," Cyrus said. "Not really."

"It is the destination of the road they now travel," Binah said. "Unless you find another."

"Me?" Cyrus asked. "Can't you show me another one? Show me how that doesn't happen."

In less than a blink, Cyrus was standing on a beach beside a still lagoon. Cliffs towered behind him. Oliver Laughlin and several green-tinted and gilled Reborn were loading crates of black glass spheres into a seaplane. And a body. Cyrus's body. Oliver had the bamboo shaft with the dragon's tooth tucked into his shorts.

He uses it to betray and destroy Radu Bey, Binah said. *But he does not stop there.*

Another scene flickered into being. Radu Bey was on his back, dead, all four limbs and chains splayed out toward stone columns. The bloody dragon blister still writhed in the skin of the dead transmortal's chest.

Cyrus lay dead beside Radu. He held the Dracul blade tight in one hand, while the dragon's tooth lay on the floor, just out of reach of Cyrus's other hand.

Slay only the man and be slain. The dragon must be destroyed as well.

Cyrus was in a graveyard, watching Antigone and Diana laughing through tears beside a tombstone. He didn't need to see the name to know it was his.

And Cyrus was back, once again in the wooden throne, once again eye to eye with Binah.

"Is this what you showed William Skelton?" Cyrus asked. "All the ways he ended up dead unless he gave me the tooth? Am I supposed to go sacrifice myself now? Is that the point?"

Binah smiled. "I showed Skelton a boy who could have destroyed Phoenix."

"Could have? How? You think I didn't try?" Cyrus asked.

"Instead of lying, if you had told Rupert Greeves the truth about the tooth when you first arrived at Ashtown, what do you think would have happened to Phoenix then? Would the Burials still have been disturbed? Would you like to see? I can show you."

"No!" Cyrus said. "No thank you. I know I made mistakes. I want to know what to do next. Pythia said to learn Radu Bey's weaknesses and Phoenix's schemes. I want to know how to win, even if it does mean

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dying."

"Easy enough to say," Binah said. "Many have said similar things."

"But my family has to survive," Cyrus said. "And Diana."

"Anyone else?" Binah asked.

"Everyone else," Cyrus said. "There has to be a way. At least one. Please."

"To see it does not mean that you can make it be," Binah said. "Skelton's vision for you was changed by your choices."

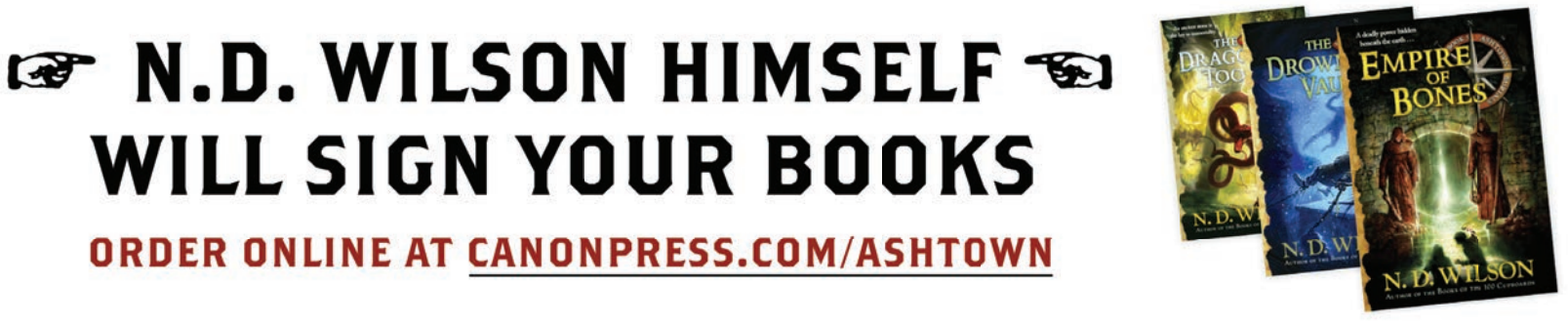
"Show me," Cyrus said. "Please."

"For the pearl," Binah said. "And the wood. And the keys."

"Fine. You want 'em, you can have 'em," Cyrus said, and he closed his eyes tight.

"Hit play," he said. "Roll the movie."

END OF CHAPTER 11 ✵



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THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN

Now tell me, Pat, WHAT is that in the window?
An arm, yer honor,
An arm, you goose?! Have you ever seen an arm that fills a whole window? Well, it's got no business being there, at any rate, go and take it away!
Er... I don't like it, yer honor...
Do as I tell you, coward!
Here comes Bill, yer honor, make Bill do it!
Bill, you must go down the chimney and remove the arm.
Yers, yer honor!
Oh! So Bill's got to come down the chimney, has he?
skitter skitter
This must be Bill!
WHUMPH!
There goes Bill!

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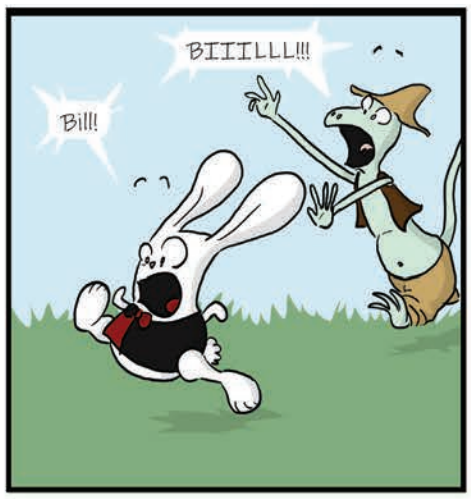
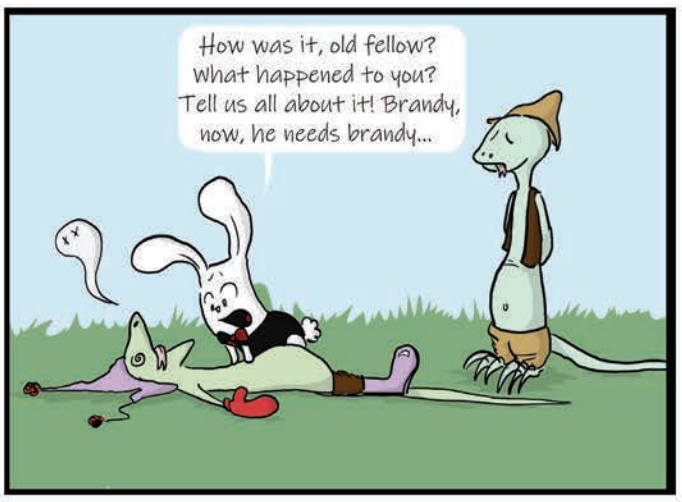
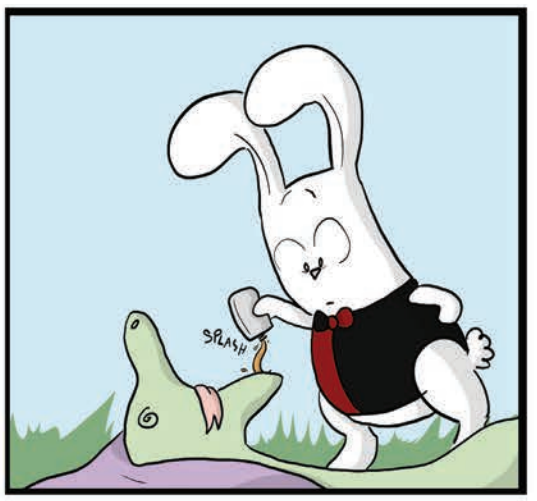
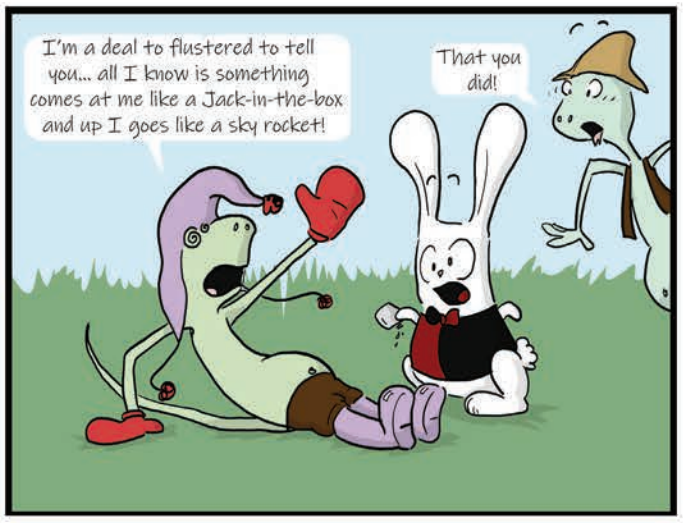
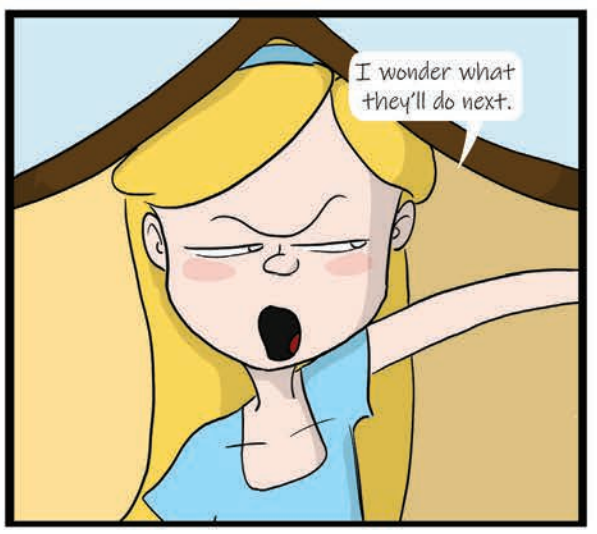







I'm a deal to flustered to tell you... all I know is something comes at me like a Jack-in-the-box and up I goes like a sky rocket!
That you did!



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CHAPTER TWELVE

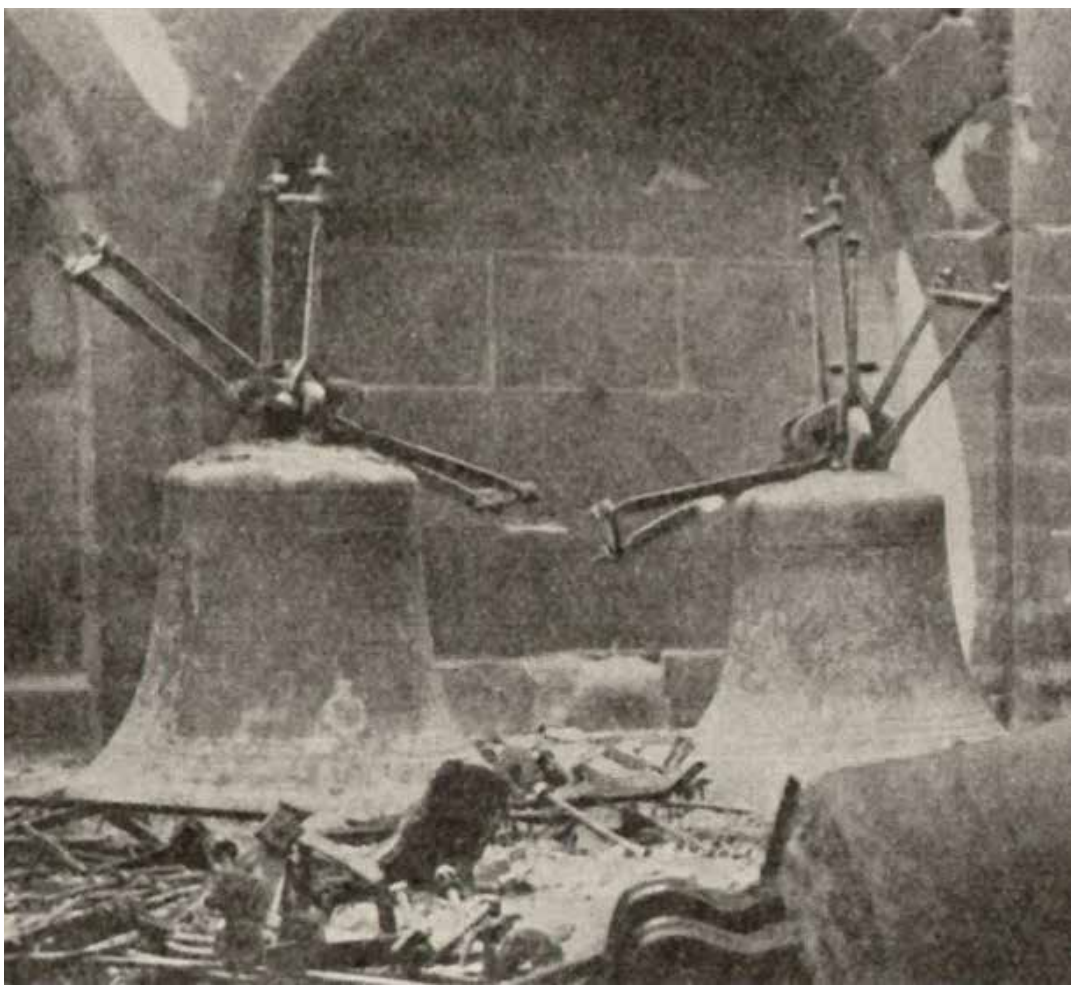
N.D. WILSON

12

KANDAKE

Antigone could hear Niffy's singing above the cheerful clatter of plates and the ringing of silverware before Wiglaf's deep voice took over, sending vibrations through the wooden checkerboard floor beneath Antigone's feet and buzzing in her skull as she followed Rupert Greeves.

The Avengel did not break stride as he moved through the wide hallway on his way to the rear of the great house. He carried one sagging pack from Ashtown over his right shoulder, and Captain John Smith's Dracul blade was still strapped onto his back. Antigone hopped forward out of her walk, jogging to keep up.



"Where are we going?" Antigone asked. "Rupe!"

"You wanted answers," Rupert said. "As do I. I will not speak them or seek them within these walls."

Antigone caught up to the big man, hoping he would slow a little when she was alongside him.

Rupert did not slow. He wound his way through a large drawing room, bumping furniture out of his way, and then entered a tapestried music room, cluttered with harps and three pianos facing each other. Antigone remained in a jog until Rupert had pushed aside a startled young guard, thrown open a pair of tall, glass-paned French doors, and stepped out into the night.

They crossed a wide stone patio above the ruins that owned the long slope below the house.

The patio was slick with dew, and small toads hiccupped and tumbled away in every dark direction as Rupert and Antigone crossed the wide stone pavers to the top of a long stairway that stretched down toward the ruins.

The moon was in the west, and her light was strong enough to reveal half of the ruins while burying the rest in deep shadow.

"So…" Antigone said. "What are we doing, and why are we doing it now?"

"I have eaten," Rupert said. "And I will not sleep for hours. If you are still hungry, return."

Antigone looked up at her Keeper's dark face, glowing silver in the moonlight. "Are you ever going to tell me what a Kandake is and what the deal was with your mom? This place has you on edge, it's personal for you, and I know you're big and strong and British and don't like to, you know, share what you're feeling—or even what you're thinking—but you should probably process whatever this is out loud."

Rupert gave Antigone a long look before returning his focus to the ruins on the slope below. "Your questions have nothing to do with your own curiosity?" he asked, smiling. "They are solely motivated by a desire to help me process my feelings?"

"Obviously," Antigone said. "I hate understanding what's going on around me, but I'll sacrifice for you just this once."

"Today, I gave into a temptation that has lived with me for as long as I can remember," Rupert said. "I have imagined visiting this place my entire life. I used to pour over old photos and maps and blueprints, herd management ledgers and crop rotations. Every document or image the Order had ever stored."

Antigone nodded. "Your mom was from here?"

Rupert laughed. "My mother was the heir to this hidden house and to those ruins and all the land you saw today. She was Candace, daughter of Candace, daughter of Candace, last in a long line of queens that outlasted the peoples they once protected."

"Candace?" Antigone asked.

"Kandake," Rupert answered. "If we ignore the Latinization of the pronunciation." He smiled at Antigone. "I know ignoring Latin is hard for a Smith."

"Hey, now. Cyrus doesn't represent all of us." Antigone watched cloud shadows sail through the silver moonlight, spilling across the ruined walls below. "So, if your mom was the heir, aren't you the heir now? Who are the people here now?"

"Some must have been imported more recently," Rupert said. He cleared his throat and rolled his head like he did before physical combat training, preparing for heavy exertion. Antigone held her breath. Rupert

rarely told complete stories, and she didn't want anything to derail him at the outset. "Historically," Rupert began, "when an old O of B family lost their lands or wealth, they were faced with two options. They could remain in the Order and be assigned to service, or they could withdraw from the Order completely and enter the nationalistic civilian world."

Rupert sniffed and raised his face toward the moon. Antigone thought that his sharp jaw and tight pointed beard made him look the statue of some ancient king. The sword hilt standing proud above his right shoulder didn't hurt the effect. But Antigone wanted more words. A lot more words. She couldn't let Rupe lose momentum now.

"Like Dennis Gilly," Antigone prompted. "Isn't that why he was a groundskeeper?"

"Money was only part of the Gilly fall from grace," Rupert said. "But yes. More like Hillary Drake." Rupert broke his pose, more relaxed now that he was getting away from the central topic. "The Drakes were legendary explorers in and out of the O of B, like the Smiths. The Captain built significant wealth, and your family was wealthy for centuries after. But not forever. Your own great-grandparents chose service, and your grandparents after them."

"Dad's parents?" Antigone asked. She felt a flash of guilt as she groped for their names in her memory. "Albert and Gertrude? They were groundskeepers?"

"No," Rupert said. "Their service was nothing like the service of Dennis Gilly. The Smiths were itinerate and highly trained. For a time, they traveled from house to house, maintaining and improving estates between occupancies, often restabilizing security after an… incident. But that wasn't enough to rebuild the Smith's wealth and independence. Higher pay came with higher risks, so Albert Smith worked on bounty and hazard pay through most of your father's childhood, often reporting directly to the Avengels."

"Bounty?" A tiny toad hopped onto the toe of Antigone's shoe, and she stopped herself from reflexively kicking it off. "You mean a bounty hunter tracking criminals?"

"More like a monster hunter," Rupert said. "But he hunted the occasional Order outlaw as well. Albert was soft spoken, but lethal in the field. At least by reputation. He rarely worked with others."

Antigone was distracted by her own backstory. But she could dig more Smith history up later. Right now, she wanted Rupert to focus on Rupert, to explain his own origins and the interaction she had heard with the woman upstairs earlier.

"Weird," Antigone said. "But I guess it makes sense. Sounds like old Grandpa Albert would be pretty useful right about now. But what does any of that have to do with you and this house?"

Rupert wasn't ready to change the subject. "The tragedy of it all was that Albert was successful. He recovered lands and built enough wealth to send his remaining children out of service and into training at Ashtown." Rupert looked at Antigone. "Where they met Edwin Laughlin. Dr. Phoenix. And Lawrence met me. Between Phoenix and my own determined folly, we nearly ended the Smith line forever."

Antigone was surprised by the heat building up behind her eyes. She blinked it away and shook her head, embarrassed. "Hey," she said. "The world isn't rid of us yet. Cyrus and Dan are still out there, right? And I'm still breathing as far as I can tell. Now are you going to tell me about this place? About you? Or are you just going to keep trying to make me cry until I give up and leave you alone? You're the one who brought me out here."

Rupert smiled and put a heavy arm around Antigone's shoulders.

"Apologies, Antigone Smith."

Antigone pulled away and tucked her hair behind her ears. "Just keep talking. But less about Smiths."

"This place," Rupert said. "This is the seat of Meroe, a place hidden and protected by long and careful design. Through many times and ages, her secrets have been sought by empires, treasure hunters, scavengers, and villains. The new house, where we now stand, was built more than three centuries ago. The house, the ruins and their contents, to say nothing of my mother's grandmothers, were all in need of protection. And so, the Kandake of Meroe sought out the O of B, then at its purest and most powerful. The full extent of this ancient site, along with the bloodline of the Kandake, became a protectorate under the Order's stewardship, until such a time that the heirs of the Kandake should choose otherwise. And for generations, the Brendan fulfilled his role faithfully and with wisdom."

Rupert stopped and Antigone bit her lip, refusing to fill the vacuum of silence with her own words, waiting for him to give in and continue. Nearly a minute passed before Rupert spoke again.

"In my great-grandmother's childhood," Rupert said, "an old family with deep roots and allies in the Order, the Maria-Victors, were convicted of brutality in what was then the Belgian Congo. Under previous Brendans, any member guilty of the same acts would have been hung in Ashtown's courtyard. But the Maria-Victors were connected by blood and marriage to European royalty. The Brendan at the time was young and foolish and impressed by such things. He believed himself firm when the Maria-Victors were stripped of all their Order estates and were sentenced to one hundred years of service in exile. But he then functionally bequeathed them new titles and lands. They were appointed Independent Stewards of Meroe, Guardians of the Kandake. He bound the Maria-Victor bloodline to the Kandake, without any oversight, for the full century of their imposed exile."

Antigone struggled against a yawn. Rupert stared at her, eyebrows raised in insulted disbelief, but a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth.

"Am I boring you, Miss Smith?"

"Sorry!" Antigone said. "Sorry! No! I promise I'm not bored. Not at all! Just tired. I'm guessing the Maria-Victors decided that they should be the real owners?"

"They did," Rupert said. "When my grandmother died there was still a household guard and the MVs were not even permitted in the main house. But my mother was young, innocent, and oblivious when members of her bodyguard began to have bizarre accidents."

"How old was she?" Antigone asked.

"Ten," Rupert said. "Ten when the last three living members of her household guard woke her in the middle of the night and led her down through those ruins toward freedom." Rupert glanced back at the house behind them. "She was hunted like an animal that night, and by the very men who had sworn to protect her."

Antigone turned and looked back at the glowing windows above her. "These people?" she asked. "They tried to kill your mom?"

"Some of them," Rupert said. "The one they called Mother was my mother's nanny at the time."

"So, what happened?" Antigone asked. "Obviously, she escaped, because you're alive, but how?"

"The two younger members of her guard made a stand that night, much like Alan made for us at beside the river under Ashtown, buying her precious hours to escape. One was my mother's cousin. The other was her older brother, Rupert Prester Meroe. He was only sixteen."

Antigone swallowed, waiting, wondering how much more Rupe would allow himself to share. She glanced up at the big man's profile in the moonlight. Rupert's voice hadn't wavered at all in the telling of his mother's story, but Antigone was not at all surprised to see the big man's Adam's apple bob beneath his jaw, proving that he was no statue.

"My mother's lone surviving guard," Rupert continued, "was an old man who managed to lead her all the way to Ghana, and from there to London, where he introduced her to my father's family before finally dying. She took the name Greeves in England, first as a disguise, before she ever married my father. Even then, to identify herself would have been dangerous."

"What was her name?" Antigone asked.

"My father called her Kandi," Rupert said. "Or Kandi Queen." He cleared his throat and straightened where he stood.

"I'm sorry," Antigone said, glancing back at the big house and lowering her voice. "Rupe, you're the Avengel. How are these people still alive? I don't understand."

Rupert Prester Greeves laughed, deep and rich and loud like a rolling bass drum. The little toad hopped off Antigone's toe. The heaviness of the moment had evaporated.

"Antigone, I will not lie to you. For many years, murder was in my heart. Especially after my parents died. And when I was young, I wanted to become Avengel for one reason only—to purify this place with the blood of Maria-Victors and reclaim these lands as my own."

Rupert drew the Dracul blade from over his shoulder and pointed it at the moon. Reflected silver light striped his face.

"And?" Antigone asked. "Why didn't you?"

"The Avengel cannot taint the purity of justice with personal vengeance. The bitterness I held in my heart against the Maria-Victors, and the wealth I stood to gain from destroying them, meant that I could never be a just judge. And so, the theft has been allowed to stand these many years, although, I have known every secret path to this place since I was your age and competing with your father. I studied the blueprints of this house in the Avengel's library until I could draw them all by hand while asleep. I knew of the door in the Room of Forbidden Ways, and I left it undisturbed with the others. When judgement comes to the Maria-Victors, as it already has and as it will, it will come in God's time, not by my premeditation."

"Then why are we here?" Antigone asked. "Why this place?"

"Because Ashtown has fallen," Rupert said. "Because, Antigone Smith, when the world shakes, when the pride of a people crumbles like a tower of sand and our weighty things are no more than shanties stolen and scattered by the wind, then it is time to return to the start, to first things. We are here to begin again."

"I'm sorry," Antigone said. "We… I don't follow."

Rupert turned to face her, pack over his right shoulder and bare sword in his hand. She had seen Rupert's eyes as hard as stone. Angry. Furious even. She had seen them lost and dreaming. Pitying. Hopeful. Sparkling and happy. Even dead. But his eyes had never looked into hers like they were looking now. Rupe's eyes were hooded and heavy, staring into her own eyes like he could see through them to something on a distant horizon, flipping through her thoughts, her fears, her worries, shuffling through her memories like cards. Seeking for something in her that he knew he would find.

Antigone blinked and looked away.

"Would you like to know what I saw?" Rupert asked.

"What you saw?" Antigone asked. "What do you mean?"

"When I was dead," Rupert said.

Antigone sniffed, focusing on the moonlit ruins below her. She wasn't ready for more invasive, deep-diving eye contact. She didn't respond.

"I saw this place," Rupert said. "I saw what must be done, and that you and I must do it. The O of B is now without a home and without a Brendan. But before Brendan gave speech to his belfries in the Ashtown Estate, the Tongues of Borodon sang their hymns in two other towers on this Earth. In Monasterboice, in Ireland, home to Brother Niffy and the last of the Cryptkeepers. And before that, here, in that tower below us. This is where these tongues were forged. This is where they first sang. Tonight, we, the remnant of the Order of Brendan, are returning to first things."

Rupert sheathed his sword and then dropped his heavy pack with a metallic clatter. The patio stone cracked beneath it.

"Um," Antigone said. "Rupe?" She squatted down and brushed away shards of stone. "You broke it."

"Open the bag," Rupert said.

The pack was made of green, waxed canvas, greasy to Antigone's touch. She slipped a loop free from a wooden toggle and lifted the flap, revealing three tarnished bronze bell tongues, each the size of a large mallet.

"Wiglaf used these," Antigone said. "To club those weird things."

"The Naga," Rupert said. "And I wish he had not. Although, King David ate the sacred showbread when in need. And there are worse uses of these tongues than the crushing of Naga skulls. But tonight, we will put them to their true purpose and set them ringing. Tonight, this place, which was the sanctuary of the first of the baptized Kandake, and which became the last stronghold of Prester John, and then the hiding place of the kingdomless Kandake in exile, this place that was the home of my mothers for two thousand years, this place will speak to the world again. She will find her voice and become the seat of Brendan's children."

Rupert extended his right hand down to Antigone.

"If you wanted them back," Antigone grunted. "You shouldn't have dropped them." Gripping the pack with both hands, she teetered and tipped onto her knees before she could hand it back up to him.

"So," she said, rising to her feet as Rupert slung the pack over his shoulder. "What's so special about these bells?"

"They have slept in silence for one thousand years," Rupert said. "And more. I will not lie to you. They may be even more dangerous for us to wake than the Brothers Below. If it goes wrong…"

Antigone leaned forward, studying Rupert's face, unsure if he was serious. His face was slick with sweat or with humidity, or both. Was he feverish?

"The bells?" Antigone asked. "How can bells be dangerous?"

"Come," Rupert said, and he stepped off the stone patio onto the dew damp grass. "By sunrise, you will understand."

Antigone froze, watching Rupert stride down toward the ruins with his pack clattering. Hadn't this been what she wanted when Rupert had been stretched out lifeless on a stone slab? Decisions? Plans? Someone else knowing what to do next? She had forgotten how rarely Rupert explained things. No, that wasn't fair. He had just told her more than he usually did. A lot more. Just not enough.

Rupert's moonlit silhouette reached the first ruined wall and paused, looking back.

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"Antigone Smith!" he called. "Journeyman of the Order of Brendan, Ashtown Estate, your Avengel requires your assistance."

Antigone tucked her hair behind her ears and crossed her arms.

"Say please!" she shouted.

Rupert laughed. "Right now, Tigs!" he yelled. "Are you wearing your Angel Skin?"

"Always," Antigone said. Reaching under her shirt she felt for the smooth hem of the protective spider-silk shirt Arachne and her army had woven her in what now felt like another lifetime. "I don't remember the last time I haven't."

"Then there's no reason not to get down here," Rupert said. "Come on then, and leave your Cyrus snark up at the house!"

Arachne's eyes fluttered open, but barely. Her lids were heavy and swollen. Her cheeks felt like mountains soon to erupt. She was hanging from chains on her wrists, her back against a cold stone wall. Beneath the chains, her wrists were raw, almost to the bone. Her burns were too much to process—every centimeter of bare skin and half of her scalp was now blistered and weeping ooze. Centuries had come and gone since the last time she had felt so much physical pain. Then, like now, she had envied the simple exit any mortal would have made by this point. Death. The last escape that was always out of her reach. Her spirit could not leave her body, no matter how broken she might be.

Arachne could feel hundreds of her surviving spiders moving hidden beneath her clothes, working to stitch and seal the open wounds on her back. Others, on her foggy instruction, were weaving the back of her shirt to the stone wall to distribute her weight off of her wrists.

"Open your eyes, traitor." Radu Bey's voice was cold and flat, but brutality and anger were just beneath the calm, a river racing beneath ice.

Arachne did not bother to answer. Her eyes were as open as they were going to get. And she didn't feel like turning her head.

Radu Bey stepped into view, dragging his own broken chains behind him. Arachne saw him blurry around the edges, but very much himself—bare chested and bare legged, with his thick arms crossed beneath his writhing dragon blister. Arachne couldn't help but smile. Radu's once smooth olive skin was now blotchy and mottled, puckered with sores, stings, and bites in a swarm that ran from his no-longer godlike brow all the way down to the tops of his bare feet. The great and beautiful Radu Bey now looked more like the victim of the world's worst case of chicken pox.

"When will they wake, witch?" Radu asked, gesturing at a row of large bodies laid out on the floor behind him.

Arachne blinked at the bulky shapes of six unconscious transmortals in a row on the floor. Another one or two had floated down the river. They would eventually wake somewhere in Lake Michigan, no doubt. *The river.* She couldn't hear it at all, so Radu had obviously brought her some distance from the scene of her first attack. And he had gone back to retrieve the bodies of the others as well.

"Witch?" Arachne smiled and felt her lips crack. "You are more witch than I, Radu Dracul, blood mage. Have you forgotten? A demon rules your blood. I am a simple weaver."

Radu's dragon blister spun in his chest.

Do not play games with me, Azazel's voice snapped in Arachne's head like the tail that had bathed her in flame. *When will they wake?*

"Begone from me, worm," Arachne said. "You were not far from sleep yourself. Another few hundred stings and it may still come."

Radu suddenly turned in place, scanning the stone floor like a housewife frightened of a spider. Arachne shut her eyes and let her mind stretch out, searching for survivors. She needed Whip Spiders. Most had been charred or swept away in the river. But thousands still lived, clinging to the walls of the tunnel where the battle had been fought.

That's why Radu had moved her. Her spiders held the tunnel.

"Days," Arachne said. "They could sleep for days. Weeks even. Forever if the Smith Desolation returns with the Reaper's Blade before they wake."

"Desolation?" Radu asked.

Arachne cracked her eyes back open. "Call him Cyrus if you like," she said. "He will cut that worm from your flesh before the end. He will be the one standing over you when you take your last breath. You must know this."

Stupid girl! You know nothing!

Arachne could taste the sour tin of blood draining down the back of her throat. She coughed, spat, and then smiled again.

"Do what you like to me, Radu Bey. The pain will pass, and I will live to see the young Smith take a fourth Dracul head for his family's crest."

Cyrus Smith opened his eyes and rose from the wooden throne. Binah stood motionless, watching him. Torchlight rippled on the wall of water behind her.

"Have you chosen your path?" Binah asked. "Will you go to your sister or to your foe?"

"How do I leave?" Cyrus asked.

"That depends on your choice."

"How do I get to my sister?"

"Ah," Binah said. "Is she more important than the village of your mother's people burning outside this mountain? Than the girl who journeyed with you through the jungle? Is your sister's need more urgent than the orbs of devil glass now being stolen by your enemy? Is she more important than the dragon Azazel gathering a living temple to himself to open the Burials of Ashtown?"

"Ah, yourself," Cyrus answered. "And yes. Antigone wins. I need to get out of here. She and Rupe don't have a lot of time. How do I get there fast? I saw a portal thing."

"Where there are trees, there are ways. This is your choice?" Binah asked.

"Enough already," Cyrus said. "Yes." He tore the pearl and the shard of wood off his keyring and held them out in his palm. "Here. Take them. I know what I have to do. The keys are still in the water lock, right? I won't be back."

Binah's fingers were hot on Cyrus's palm when she collected her payment. Hotter when she placed them on his cheeks and stared up into his eyes.

"Cyrus Smith has chosen," she said. "Walk into the darkness behind the thrones. When it swallows you, there you will find a door. Through that door you will find grief and hardship and war."

"And my sister?" Cyrus asked. "That tough stuff was coming no matter what."

"And your sister," Binah said. "Now go."

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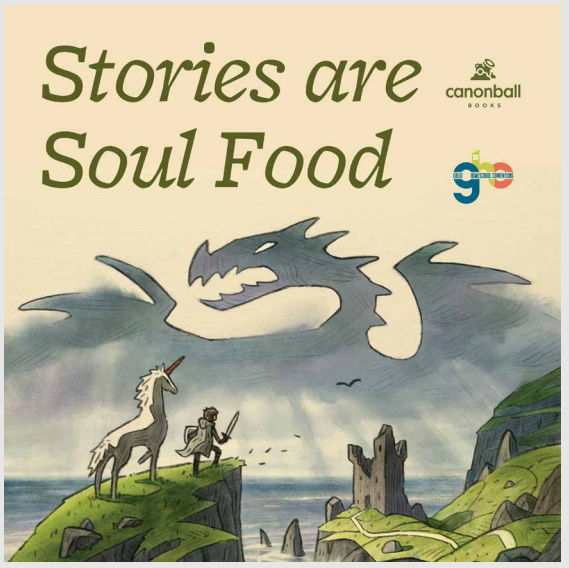

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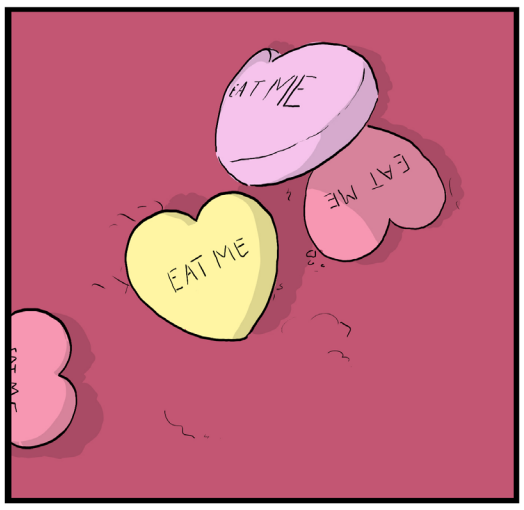
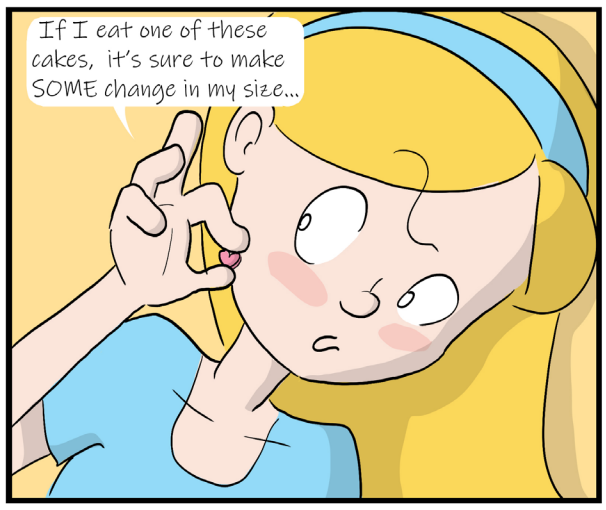
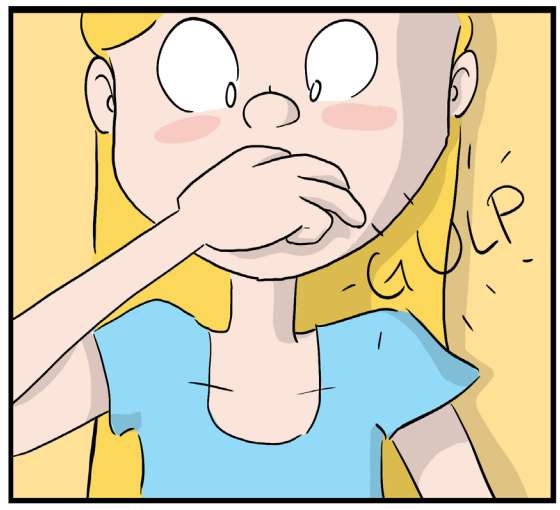
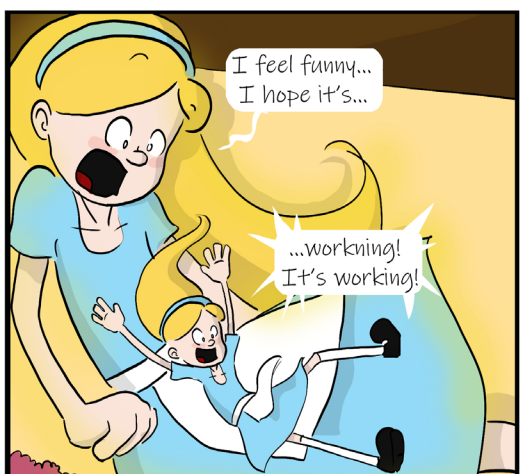
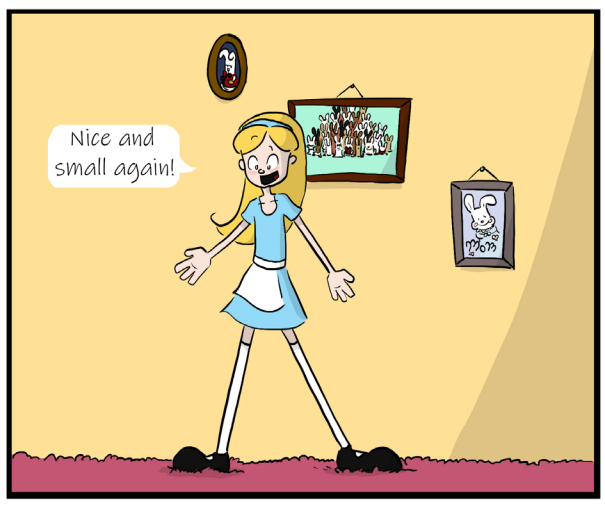
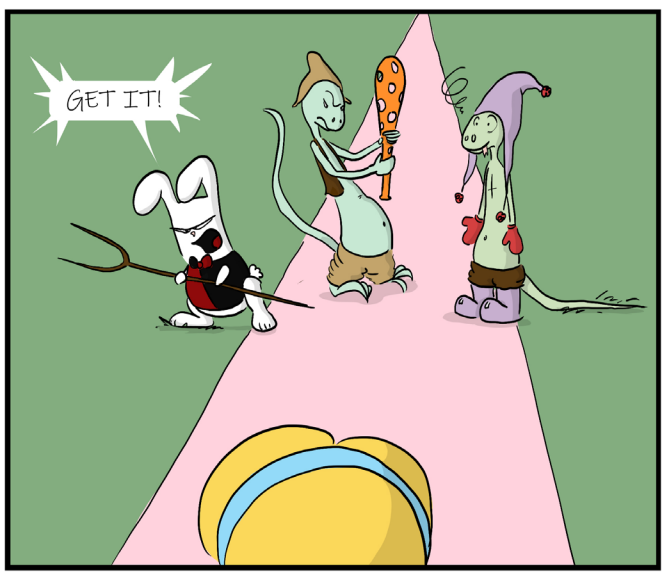


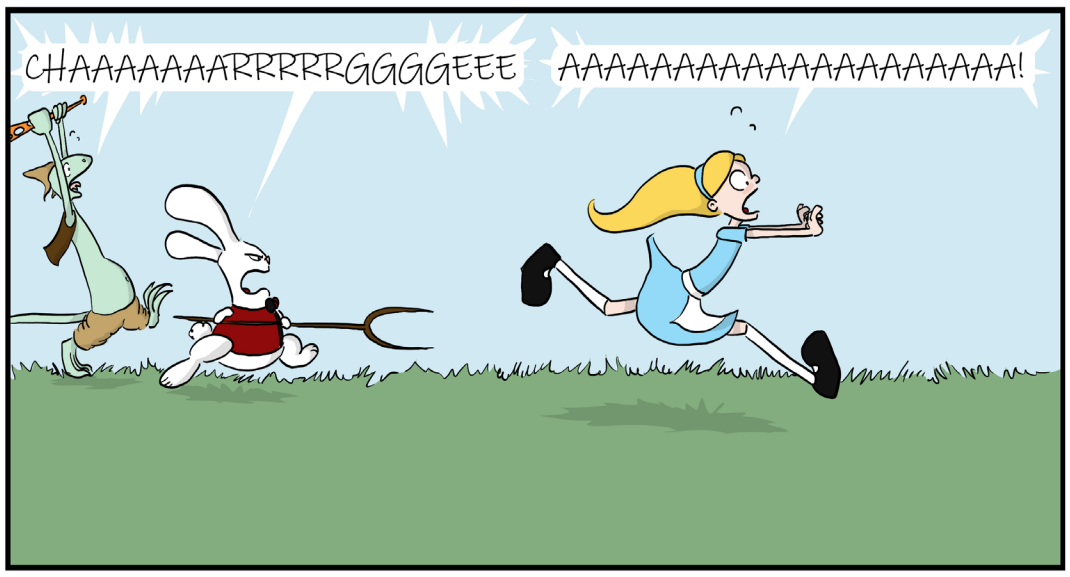


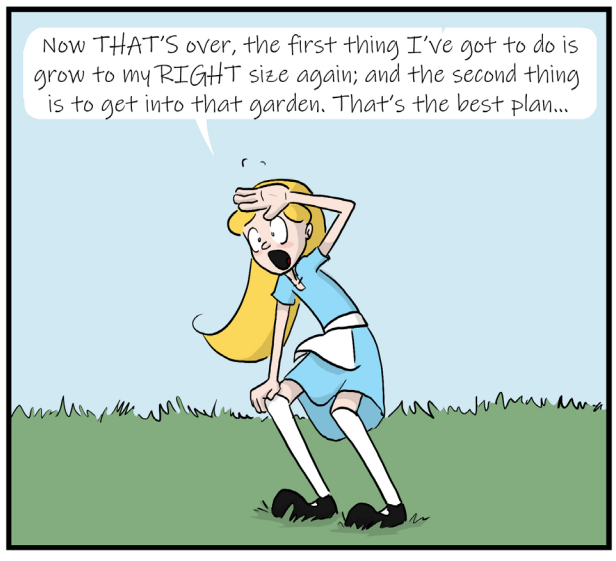


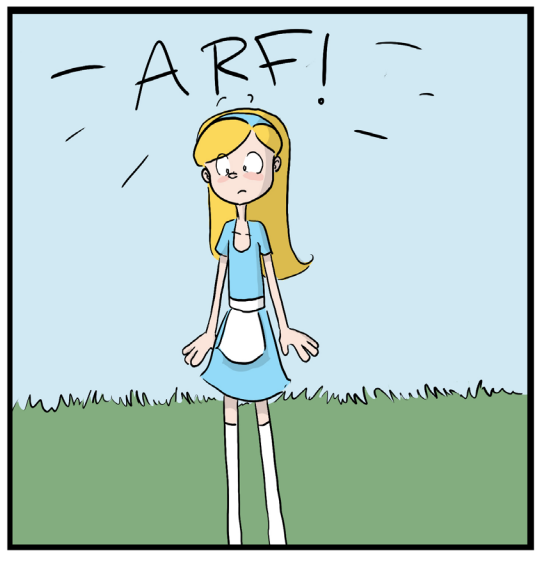









Now THAT'S over, the first thing I've got to do is grow to my RIGHT size again; and the second thing is to get into that garden. That's the best plan...



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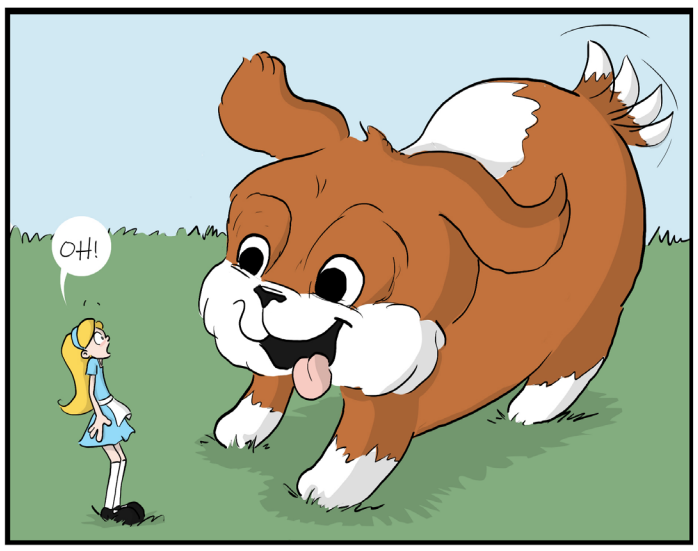

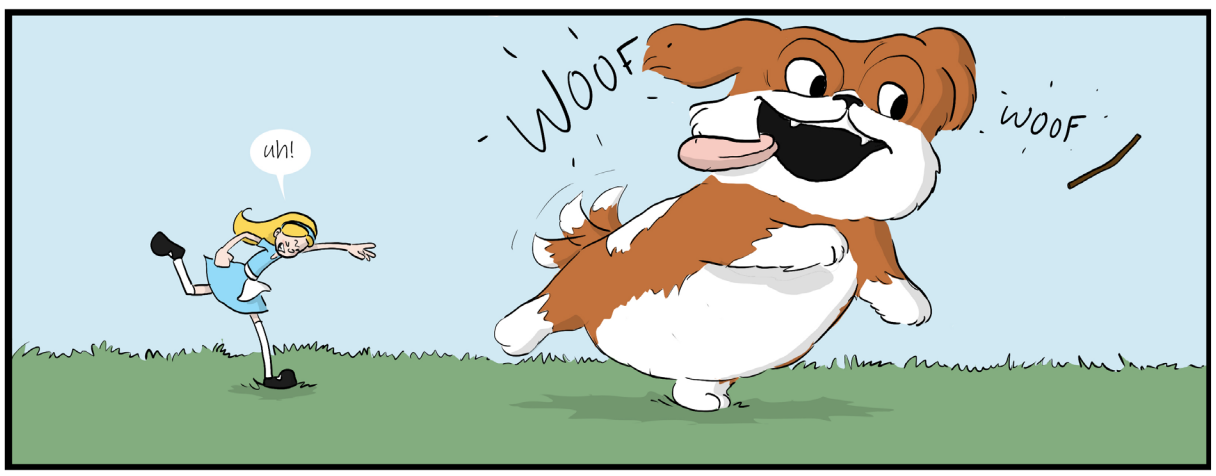

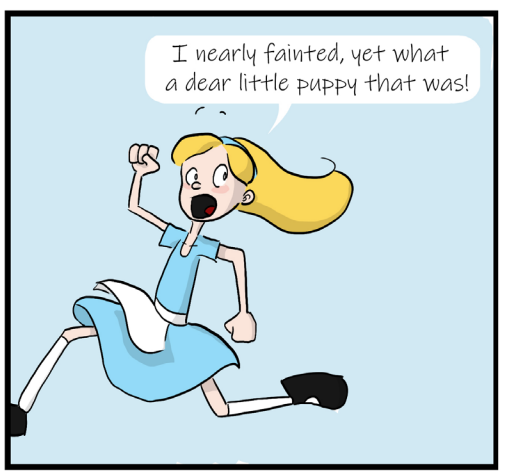

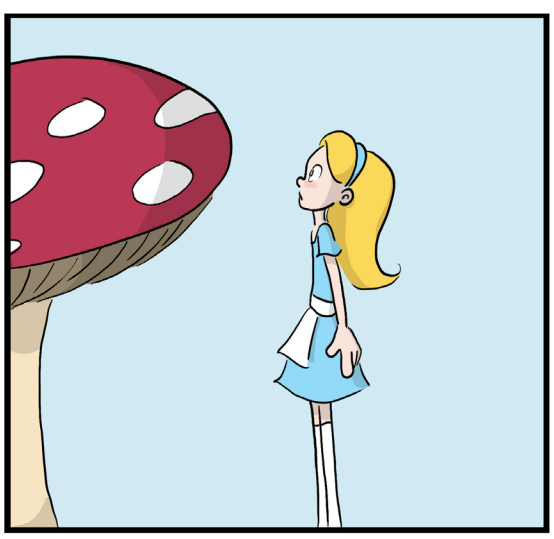

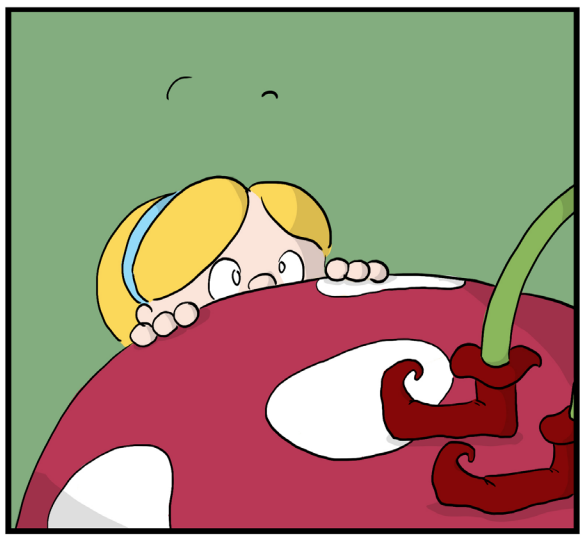

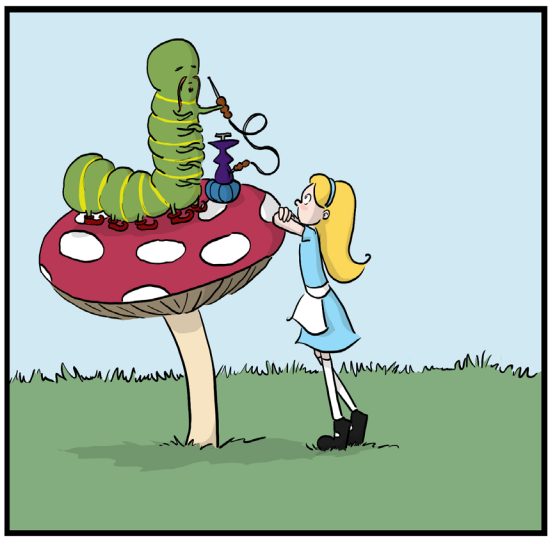

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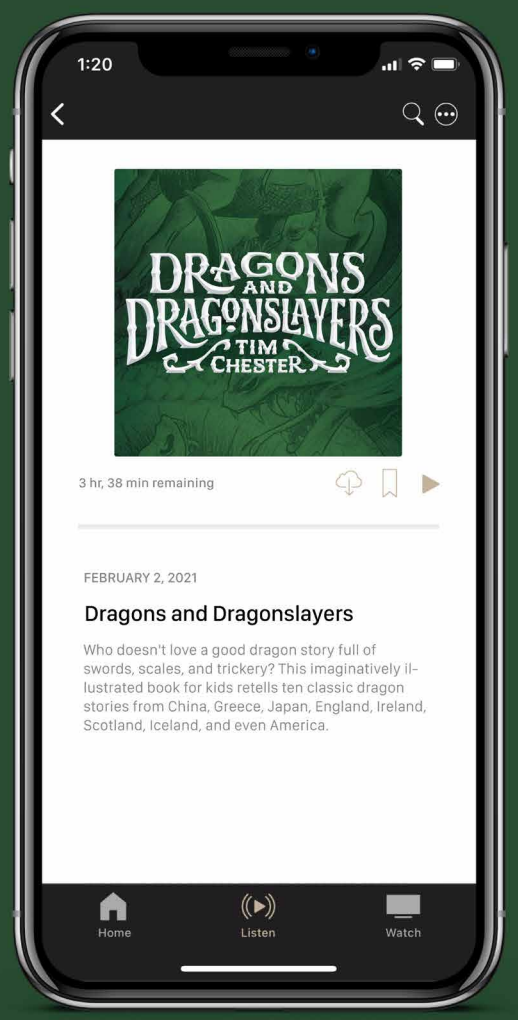
CHAPTER 12

THE SILENT BELLS OF ASHTOWN BURIALS

AN ORDER OF THE BRENDAN'S BOOK SERIAL EDITION

CHAPTER 12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The Silent Bells

SERIAL EDITION

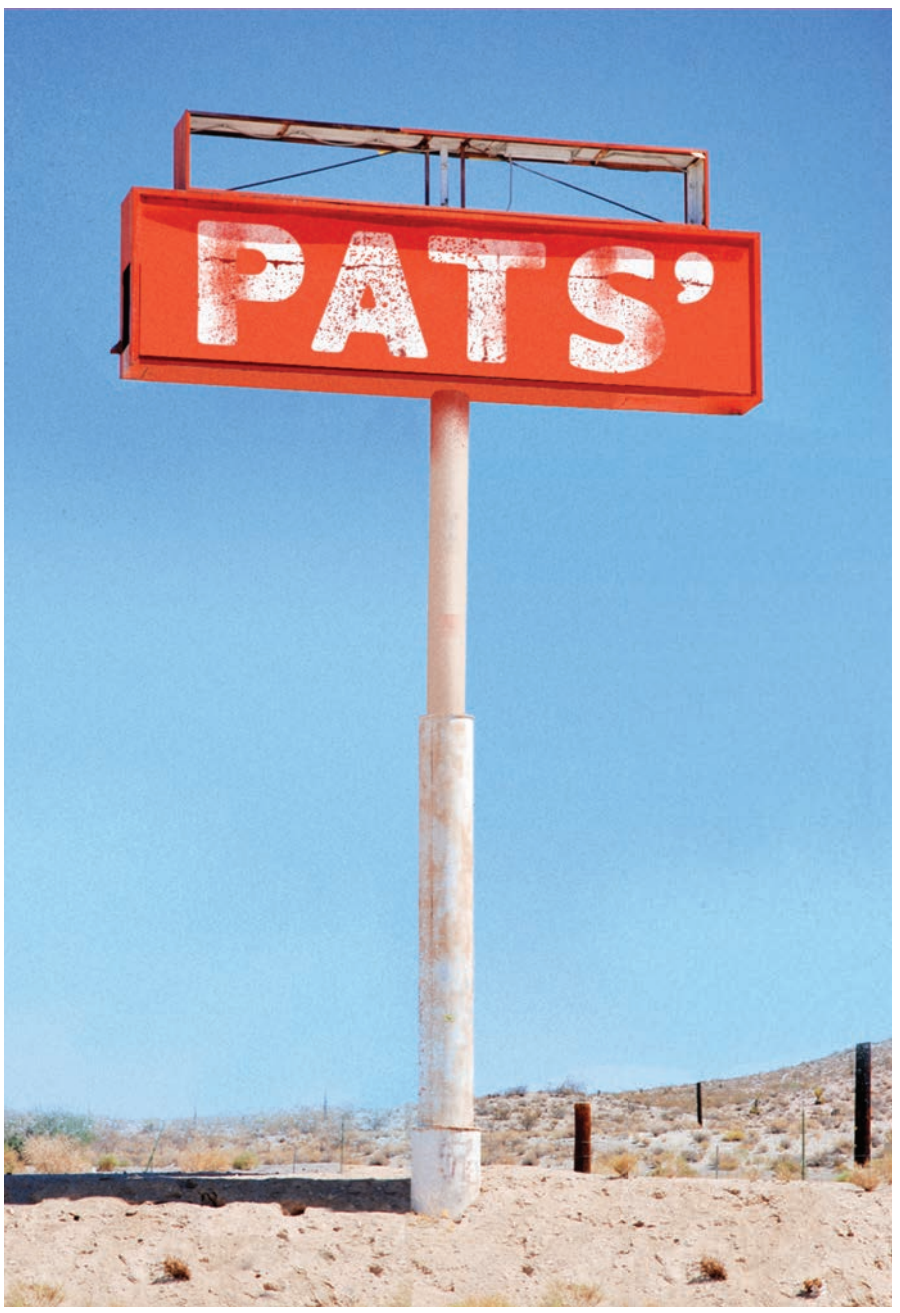
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

N.D. WILSON

13

THE STREETS OF THE DEAD

Roy Hamm was not built for trail-blazing hikes in the woods, especially not in the heat of a sticky Friday afternoon. Roy's shoes were wrong—loose and floppy, white low-tops that had never even trekked across a lawn. Roy's shorts were wrong—red, light-weight gym shorts that couldn't even withstand a poke from a dry leaf, let alone the branches and twigs and thorns Roy was now crashing through. Roy's purple, truck-stop t-shirt, emblazoned with the phrase, *My Body is a Wonderland*, was even worse—failing to decently cover the underside of Roy's significant belly or the twin heaps of flesh in the small of his back. Worst of all, Roy's legs were wrong, his duckling gait was wrong, his lungs were wrong, his heart was wrong, and death was dancing much closer than he realized.



On a normal day, Roy spent hours seated high in an air-conditioned truck cab thundering down interstates and bullying minivans on old state highways, listening to self-help podcasts and audio books without ceasing. Roy's nights were spent on the small but luxurious new bed in the back of his sparkly, blue truck cab.

In a given day, Roy tried to walk only twice in the great outdoors—from his parked truck to a diner. Those short meal walks, for going on three years, had been the extent of his daily exercise, and the only thing that kept him driving long haul truck routes.

On this Friday, Roy had been determined to reach Pats' diner not too far outside of Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. Pats' served what Roy considered to be the best Salisbury steak and key lime pie in all the lake states. Roy had been thinking about that specific meal choice for the past three days and had paced his route to Pennsylvania entirely around a Friday evening stop at Pats'.

If Roy had managed to reach Pats' diner that night, his planned order would have overthrown in a coup, displaced by a meat loaf and au gratin potato special followed by two slices of pie—Butterfinger Cream and Bourbon Pecan—that would have touched Roy so deeply that he would have then treated himself to a bed in The Archer Motel, where he then would have dreamt so vividly of his three children staring up at his room from beneath the gentle, crackling neon of the Pale Lady on the pole in The Archer parking lot, that Roy would have called his ex-wife, Tonya, in the morning, to arrange his first child support payment since Christmas.

But such penitence was not to be. Roy had not made it to Pats'.

For reasons Roy could not explain, unexpected reasons hatching like beetles in his brain, Roy had turned his big rig off of the winding state highway onto a rutted dirt track. He had driven through a locked and rusty gate, and had headed north through green hilly pastures, nodding politely at herds of startled dairy cows as he went. At the bottom of a hill, Roy had been forced to drop and abandon his trailer, loaded with furniture, and drive on with only his truck cab, moving through the pasture land until he'd followed another dirt track into stands of young oak trees. The young oaks had been replaced with middle aged and then ancient oaks. Heavy drooping limbs had finally barricaded the way.

There, wedged in the mud beneath an eighty-year-old limb, Roy had killed the engine and abandoned his newest and truest love in all the world—$68,000 of sparkly, blue sleeper cab semi.

There Roy had craned his bulk down out of the cab. There, he began his hike, if walking like an injured duckling can be called hiking. Roy hadn't even glanced back at his custom chrome grill or the name he had painted on the driver's door himself—Baby Bluecille.

Baby Bluecille now held her diesel breath quietly beneath the trees, ignoring squirrel and bird curiosity, collecting leaves while cicadas sang, wondering what she had done wrong, waiting for Roy, unaware that he would never return, and that her next human contact would not come until two very surprised hunters on ATVs found her one week into deer season.

Roy's legs and arms and belly were all bleeding and stinging with sweat when the strange compulsion he'd been feeling finally became a voice speaking clearly in his head.

Come quickly.

"I'm trying," Roy gasped out loud. Pausing, he tugged his drenched and clinging t-shirt away from his belly. "Is there food?"

Bring me all your hunger. All your pain.

"Because I was going to eat," Roy said. His heart was stumbling in his chest. "I don't know what's going on, and I have low blood sugar."

Come. I will give you rest. And food. Tonya never understood how much you sacrificed for her. It was never your choice to be heavy. You gave up your body to pay her bills, to feed your children. Without them, who knows how fit you would be right now?

"That's what I always say," Roy said to the cicadas in the canopy above him. "I could have been in the NFL. Or an Olympian. I don't drive truck for me."

Come. Only a little farther.

Staggering and slippery with sweat stinging in the cuts and scrapes across his legs and arms, carrying more ticks and chiggers than he could imagine, Roy struggled over the crest of a small hill and doubled over, with both hands on his soft knees, trying to catch his breath.

A gentle slope ran down from Roy to where a tall stone wall sliced through dense shade beneath of a grove of heavy oaks. One part of the wall had recently collapsed where a great tree lay uprooted beside a large crater filled with rubble and sunlight from the gap in the canopy.

While Roy wheezed, he watched people crawling and climbing across the crater until they had passed through the breach and moved out of sight.

Women—old and young—some with children. Men of every shape, race, and age, some dressed in suits, others in coveralls or reflective vests. Two in police uniforms.

For the first time, Roy felt shame. An attractive, dark-skinned woman in a pant suit looked up at him as she crossed the crater, and Roy realized how ridiculous he must look. He had been realizing how he must look for so long that the reflex was instant. He took one step backward and began to turn around.

Why was he here? Why had he done this? He made good money. He liked driving truck.

They think you are nothing.

"Who does?" Roy asked.

All of them. Your wife. Your children. Your parents. Everyone who has ever seen you. They do not understand how hard you have tried, how much pain you have felt. None of them. But I do. Come to me, and I will give you peace. I will take your pain, Roy Hamm. I will make them all respect you. I will make them love you.

Roy stumbled down the shady slope toward the breach in the wall. When he reached the rubble-filled crater, six others were already crossing over in front of him, crawling or hopping across the loose stones into what looked like overgrown grassy parkland dotted with occasional trees and occasional craters.

In the distance, Roy could see enormous stone buildings, some ruined, some with roof tops lined with statues. In the parkland, near and far, hundreds of people were flowing on foot toward the ruins. Roy knew that was where he was headed. Whoever was waiting for him there was worth more than Baby Bluecille or Tonya or his children. Whoever it was understood and appreciated him more than he could even appreciate himself.

The rubble slowed him down, but he reached the thick, ankle tall grass with only one significant gash in his shin, which was now bleeding down into his sock. The voice in his head hadn't lied, though. He'd barely felt any pain.

Come, the voice repeated. *You will be fed. You will rest. I am preparing a bed for you now.*

The rest of the hike was easiest part. The pain in his lungs was gone. The pain in his ankles and his knees and his heart…all gone, replaced with gentle tingling warmth, sleepy warmth, while a soft cool breeze caressed his overheated skin. Roy followed the crowd as he and they flowed like ants around the craters and trees, all heading toward the stone buildings.

But when Roy stopped, he was standing in front of a structure built of something else entirely.

On top of a wide dais of stacked men, all lying facedown with their arms interlocked, a large bare-skinned man, with broken chains on his ankles and wrists, sprawled across a throne of sleeping women. The man's long legs were splayed out in front of him, his bare feet were rising and falling with the slow, synchronized breathing of his human floor. A large red blister stood out of his chest.

This, Roy knew, must be a god.

Roy should have been horrified. The people who had been walking with him should have been horrified. Instead, Roy watched as his travel companions fit themselves into the outer layer of the pyramid, or into human walkways that extended out from the pyramid in all four directions, and all he felt was desire. What he wanted more than anything in the world was just to find his place and disappear into the easy sleep he saw all around him.

"You promised me," Roy said aloud, addressing the god seated on the female throne. "You said I could rest."

Be still, the voice answered in his head. *Give me your pain and find your comfort.*

Looking around, Roy saw his place. Four women, one in a power suit, were face down on the ground in the shape of a diamond at the foot of the pyramid's human stairs up to the throne. But the diamond had no center.

Roy knew he was meant to be the diamond's center. He knew a column of human bricks would rise up from his back.

As Roy Hamm slid his sweating bulk into the central gap in that diamond, he lost all sense of himself. He knew he existed, but barely. He did not feel the hands and the knees as other climbed on top of him. He felt only the pleasure of the voice of the voice in his head, and he felt one with all the lives around him. Roy's heart was beating in time with hundreds of others. His lungs matched the rhythm of those around him without effort. Lying there on his face, with four strange women in a diamond shape around him and more strangers settling in on his back, Roy felt appreciation and pleasure. He had not lived in vain. He was important. Foundational to a temple where his new god would rule the world.

Radu Bey closed his eyes and lifted his face to the sun, stretching his legs out on the living platform beneath him. The heat didn't relieve the itching from all his bites and stings, but it changed the subject in his mind. That little witch Arachne was at the bottom of Lake Michigan, where she could gather as many spiders to their deaths as she liked. Forever.

Azazel twisted in his chest.

Seven thousand more souls to open the Burials below us.

"They will come," Radu Bey said. "Reach farther. We have the

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time. Rupert is running." Radu glanced down from his throne in time to watch a large, doughy man collapse into the base of what would soon be a column. Was he really so short of sacrifices that he must pluck such unwieldy lives? He preferred to be surrounded by beauty.

Yes, Azazel said. *We must take what we can reach while we can. Greeves may flee, but what the of the boy? Azazel asked. Is the Smith running as well?*

A plane, droning like a single bee, appeared above the trees and began to descend toward the ruins of Ashtown.

"This is good," Radu said. "Teach and Brutus may have the boy already. Now be still and let me sleep."

Radu closed his eyes again and let his mind drift through pleasant and bloody memories. He wandered through forests of bodies on stakes along the road to his ancestral home. He watched cities burn and walls crumble, listening to the screams of women and children all over again. He savored the remembered taste of blood, the sensation of crunching bone in his dragon jaws. Radu revisited his first attempts at temples, his network of way stations and ports—all built of bodies laid like bricks all breathing together. Even now, centuries since his first construction attempts with Azazel, Radu Bey still had favorites.

Radu's dreams were still pleasant when Azazel woke him with claws beneath the skin of his chest.

Edward Teach stood alone, waiting at the bottom of Radu's pyramid, watching as sleepers continued to lay themselves down.

"Blackbeard," Radu said. "Where is your other? Where are the women? Where is Brutus?"

"The women are dead," Teach growled. "My brother is dead. Brutus is dead."

Azazel spun like a sawblade. Radu Bey rose to his feet and descended his human stairs.

"Dead?" Radu asked.

"Slain," Teach said.

"And the boy?" Radu loomed above the thick pirate.

"Gone," Teach said. "Entered Solomon's deep chambers alive and did not emerge."

Radu knotted both hands into enormous fists.

"If you do not have him, why have you returned?"

Teach pointed at the grass beside Radu's breathing structure. A silk parachute was bundled up like an enormous spider's egg sack. Moving toward the make-shift sack, Teach drew a knife and sliced a thread at the bundled top. The parachute collapsed, spilling hundreds of small, black, glass spheres in every direction, clicking and clattering in the overgrown grass like lightweight bowling balls.

"Boy or not," Teach said. "I can't read the names, but these change everything, Radu. For all of us. It's time for bigger dragons. But we must act quickly. The boy Phoenix collected boxes as well."

Cyrus Smith stood deep in the darkness behind Solomon's thrones. His right hand was gripping the side of an open doorway. He no longer had the tidal pearl William Skelton had given him. He no longer had the piece of truth tree that had allowed him to sit in Solomon's seat. He no longer held the two Solomon keys that could open any lock, the first tokens on the keyring that had felt truly magical to him.

William Skelton had handed him the tools to come to this place, to see all that he had seen. But now he could never return. Cyrus Smith would never get a second look, a second chance to make the choice before him. Of all the limitless things to learn in the world, the treasures he could have discovered, the secrets he could have seen, Cyrus had spent his time in Solomon's seat focused on one thing and one thing only—the destruction of dragons.

Patricia slid her cool, slender body in a full lap all the way around Cyrus's neck, as if celebrating the reduced weight of the keyring she carried. Now, her silver body held only the hinged but empty silver sheath that had once been home to the Dragon's Tooth. The black shard of tooth, the Reaper's Blade, was the last and most important of Skelton's relics that Cyrus still carried, but even that must be spent. Like the wood and the pearl and the keys, like Cyrus himself, the tooth must be used up in this struggle. It must not continue to exist. Cyrus knew that now. But until that moment, if that moment came, the tooth would remain set in silver at the end of the broken bamboo cane Cyrus had stolen from Phoenix.

Cyrus gripped the tooth at his belt, letting the cold electricity fill his arm up to the shoulder.

Before finding the door in the darkness, Cyrus had been confident in his choice. He hadn't physically seen his sister since they had been separated during the transmortal rampage at Ashtown. With just one step through this door, he could be with her again, with her and with Rupert and Diana and Jeb and Niffy and all the others that had followed Rupert to Africa. He had seen the house and the ruins and the tree beside the lake where he would emerge. And given what else Cyrus had seen—the full consequences of Rupert's plan—Cyrus wanted nothing more than the sprint through the doorway, find his sister, and get her out of those ruins, if it wasn't already too late.

But Cyrus knew he could only pass through this doorway once. He could use this move on the chessboard one time, jumping his king and his rook without traveling through the space between. And, strangely, having been seated in Solomon's seat and having gripped the true wood of those ancient chair arms with his bare hands, Cyrus knew doorways like this one were why castling was a possible move on a chess board at all. The game of kings, indeed. Ancient kings. Despite the burden Cyrus was facing, this fact amused him. Not so much the origin of the chess move as the fact that he, Cyrus Smith, now knew something—anything—about chess. He might even be good at it.

At least if he survived this, his first real game.

Binah had told him to choose, and the door would take him. Cyrus had one move to anywhere. One shot and one shot only with no take-backs or do-overs.

Which is why he was still standing in the dark, calming his breathing and listening to his own heartbeat and even feeling Patricia's tiny heart flutter beneath her scales against the side of his neck,

Cyrus was clear on his choices. He had seen what could be done and what could result and what prices could be paid. He had seen much blood and destruction, his own as well as the destruction of those he loved. And he had seen that destruction in more variations than he could count. But somehow, the burden of all that destruction was not weighing on him now. He had learned something else in that ancient wooden seat, something he had not asked to be shown.

The paths to failure are always limitless. The path to triumph is often singular.

Cyrus no longer cared about how many ways there were that he could do this wrong. And he didn't need one hundred paths to victory. He only needed one.

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Cyrus filled his lungs and inflated his cheeks.

One step to join his sister, Rupert, and then Diana.

One step to join his uncle Hanno and Mercy in fighting Phoenix on the beach.

One step to Ashtown to face Radu Bey directly.

One step to his mother and Dan before they were taken or killed.

Cyrus felt his heart pulling him in every one of those directions. But his heart was a liar, and he knew it. At the very least, his heart was bad at chess.

If he played this just right, he might still see his sister again. Maybe.

Cyrus closed his eyes, even though he was already surrounded by total darkness. Hoping that Rupert and Antigone had not yet begun ringing the bells, Cyrus made his choice and stepped through the doorway.

The first change was in Cyrus's lungs. The air was sharp and unfriendly, chilly around the edges. The second change was in the smell. Salt and the eyewatering sweet and sour rot that could only be found by the ocean at low tide. And manure.

Cyrus opened his eyes. He was standing in the doorway of a small gardening shed with rickety walls and a cold stone floor. Low sunlight was sliding through a single row of paned, grimy windows in glowing beams that looked as solid as planks.

To Cyrus's right, there were tools and teetering towers of terra cotta pots and a small barrow of manure.

To Cyrus's left there was a bench the length of the shed. The bench was covered with small pots and an army of young, green plants. A woman, wind worn and salt hardened, with gray and black hair pulled back in a firm pony-tail that accentuated the pronounced architecture of her dark throat and brow and jaw, glanced up at Cyrus from a small stool at her planting bench. She looked ancient but without any sign of frailty. She was wearing a large, saggy jacket in army green, and a pair of gloves that would have been large on Rupert Greeves.

"Hello, love," the woman said. "I was expecting you yesterday, if I'm being honest. But I've kept the tea fresh." She nodded at the bench near Cyrus's end of the shed. A battered green thermos stood next to a plate of what looked like shortbread and chocolate squares. "Go on then," she added. "Biscuits are fidgin fain. Do your duty."

"I'm sorry," Cyrus said, looking back over his shoulder through the open shed doorway. A green slope dotted with boulders climbed away toward the morning sky. "I only just decided to come here. Who are you, and what made you think I was coming?"

The woman laughed. "Oh, and it's you deciding a thing that makes it so, is it?"

Cyrus tried not to look confused.

"My name is Ringan," the woman said. "Though some call me Ninian. Ninny to the bold."

The woman rose from her stool and pulled off her gloves.

"Welcome to the street of the dead, Cyrus Smith," Ringan said. "How is Binah? I haven't seen her since I took this post long ago now. Still all feathers and pearls? I suppose she would be."

Cyrus picked up a piece of the shortbread, and a bright smile flashed across Ringan's face and was gone again, faster than a flying fish. The woman puffed a strand of hair from her face and focused her gaze on Cyrus's eyes.

One bite of shortbread was enough to send Cyrus's stomach roaring and his mind searching for any memory of his last memory of food.

"C'mon, then," Ringan said. "Let's get to it before your sister and that Greeves child end themselves and all hope of an outcome." Hooking her arm in in Cyrus's, the woman turned Cyrus around and led him outside.

The garden shed was perched on an island behind a cottage of painted white stone with bright blue shutters. The white cottage was overlooking a beach, stony tide pools, and a distant pier across a narrow channel. The pier was busy with tourists filing onto a fat, black-bellied ferry.

Ringan directed Cyrus's attention to their side of the water, down a cobbled road to a large, elegant, but unassuming stone cathedral wrapped scaffolding dotted with workers.

"This way," Ringan said, leading Cyrus down the lane toward the big church. "That churchyard holds sixty kings, and I'm thinking at least a dozen of the silent bells you're hoping to rouse. Others have claimed only seven, but centuries make these things murky."

"Hold on," Cyrus said. "When I saw this place, I only saw one bell."

"Of course you did, love," Ringan said. She pulled Cyrus in tight as they walked, still arm in arm, like an aunt with a beloved, and much taller nephew. "And I am its keeper. But it wakes the others, calling them to rise for battle—men and women long asleep—silent bells awaiting the days of wrath and desolation. How many did Binah show you?"

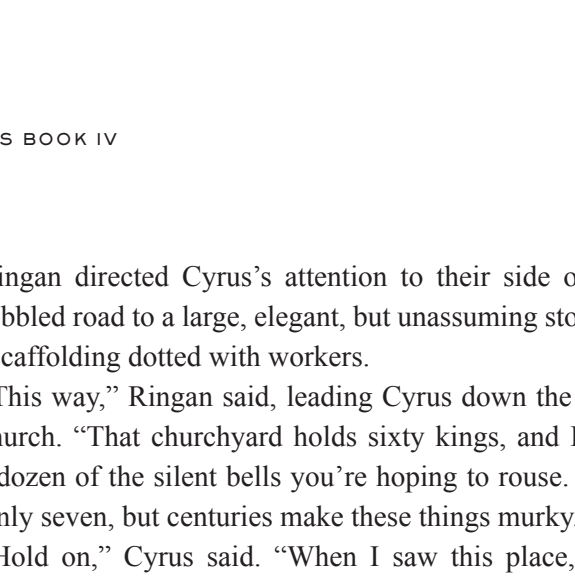
"I don't know," Cyrus said. "I saw a bunch all over the world. And most of them good."

"One hundred and forty-four," Ringan said. "And all of them terrible."

"Terrible?" Cyrus asked. "As in scary?"

"Terrible," Ringan said. "As in terrible. Brutal, merciless, and impossible to control. But you'll meet the first crop just as soon as we fish the bell out of the deepest crypt in that church yard and start shouting wakey-wakey…"

END OF CHAPTER 13 ✵



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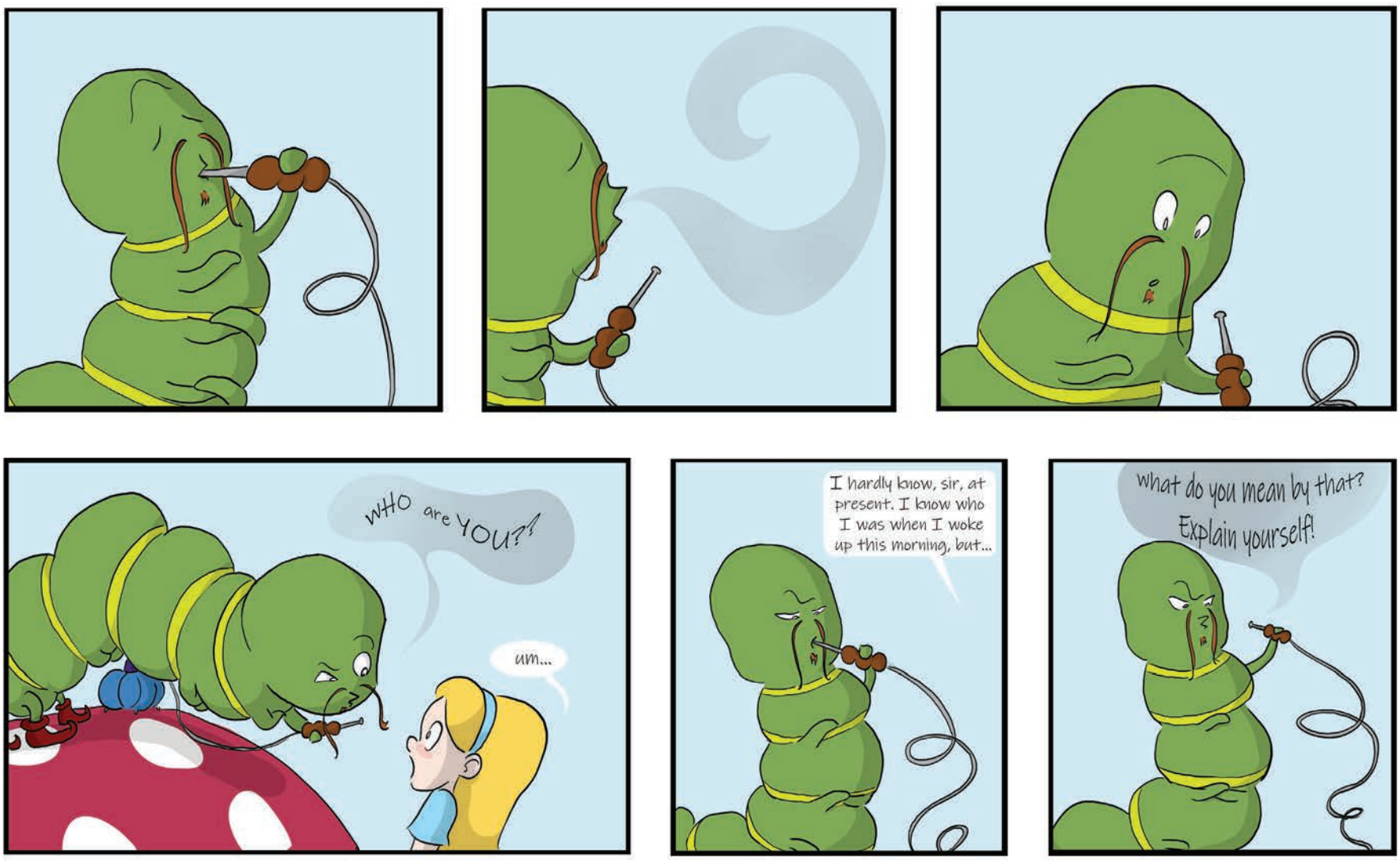
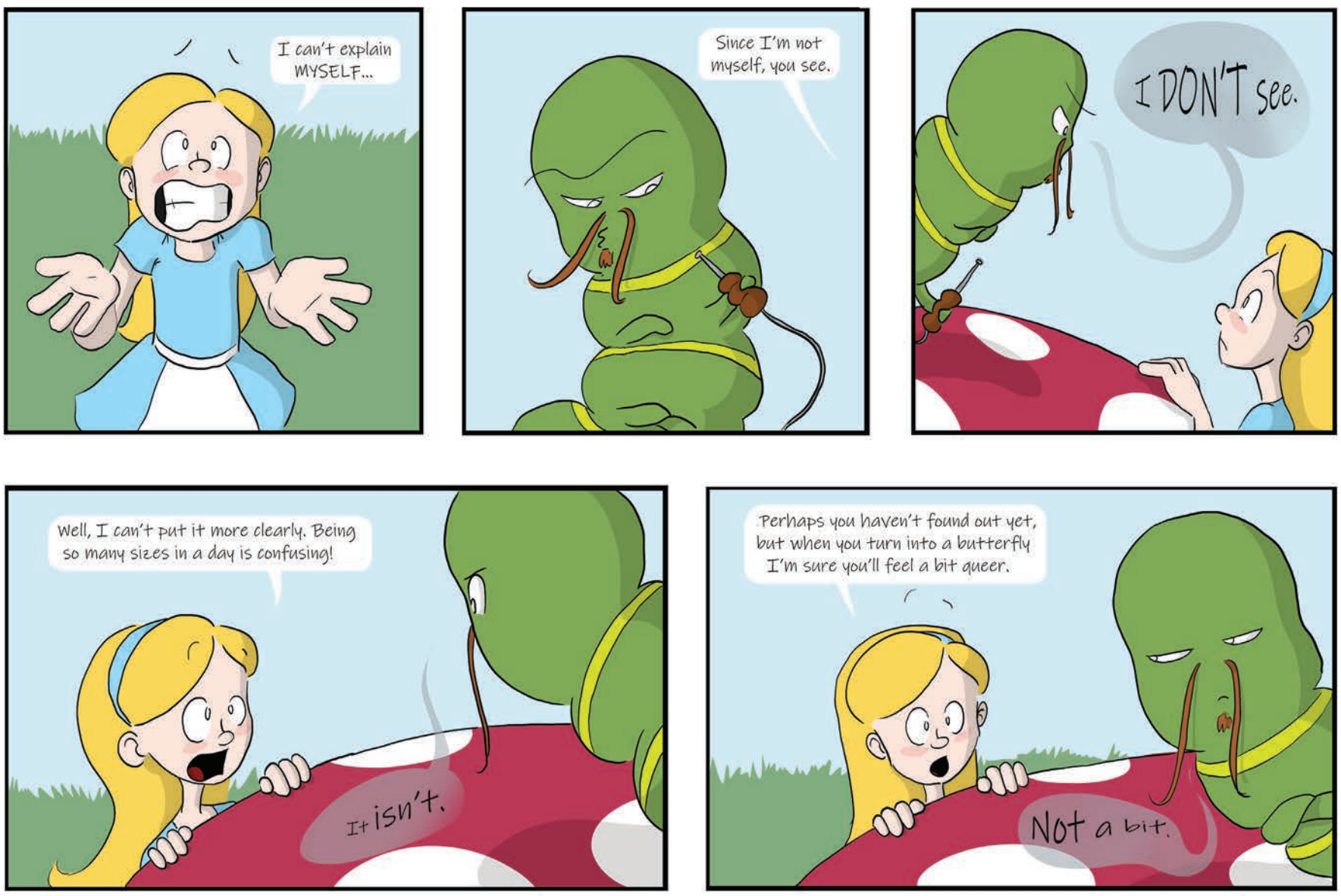

WHO are YOU?!
um...
I hardly know, sir, at present. I know who I was when I woke up this morning, but...
What do you mean by that? Explain yourself!


I can't explain MYSELF...
Since I'm not myself, you see.
I DON'T see.
Well, I can't put it more clearly. Being so many sizes in a day is confusing!
It isn't.
Perhaps you haven't found out yet, but when you turn into a butterfly I'm sure you'll feel a bit queer.
Not a bit.

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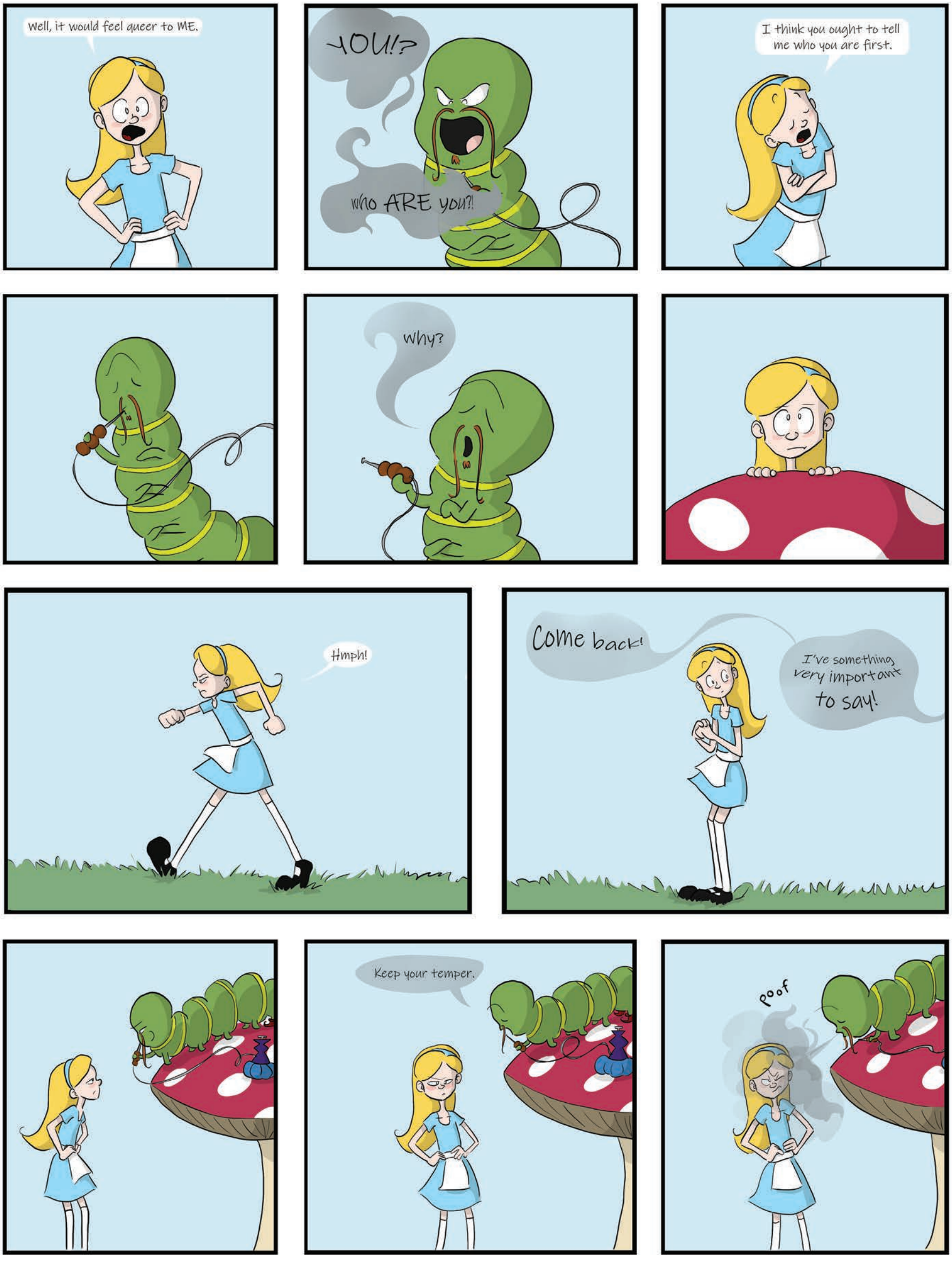

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CHAPTER 13

THE SILENT BELLS OF ASHTOWN BURIALS

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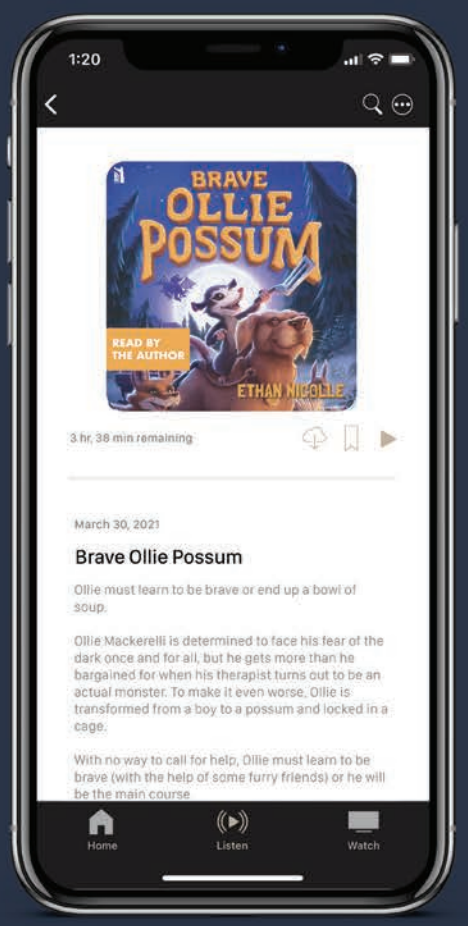
CHAPTER 13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March 30, 2021
Brave Ollie Possum
Ollie must learn to be brave or end up a bowl of soup.
Ollie Mackerelli is determined to face his fear of the dark once and for all, but he gets more than he bargained for when his therapist turns out to be an actual monster. To make it even worse, Ollie is transformed from a boy to a possum and locked in a cage.
With no way to call for help, Ollie must learn to be brave (with the help of some furry friends) or he will be the main course
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The Silent Bells

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

N.D. WILSON

14

FOR WHOM THE BELLS TOLL

A NOTE FROM N.D. WILSON:

Dear Polygoners,

Thank you for your extraordinary patience in waiting for this chapter! In addition to all my regularly scheduled mayhem, my schedule was thrown further akimbo by an unplanned surgery. But all is now well. I am nearly back to full speed, and I hope to stay on a better pace as I push toward the end of this first draft. Thanks again for making the completion of the "Ashtown Burials" possible. I will always be grateful!

Cheers,

ND

OLIVER LAUGHLIN HALF choked on the cold fluid draining down the back of his throat and sat up quickly to release a sneeze, wiping the aftermath onto the back of his pale hand. The brown velvet couch, steeply inclined with the pitch of the sinking ship, had looked so inviting—a soft, almost horizontal place to shut his eyes and clear his head before working through his next wave of decisions. In the past, Cyrus's most powerful and desperate motivation had always been the fruit of his dogged loyalty to immediate family. Assaults on the village of his mother's ancestors had not been enough to draw him out of the jungle mountain. Neither had the prospect of Phoenix and the transmortals collecting hundreds of the glass spheres containing imprisoned gin drawn him back out. Even Cyrus's loyalty to little Mercy Rios had not budged him. For that reason alone, Phoenix had been content to leave the mail carrier be. If Mercy carved out a jungle existence for herself among the surviving Cataan, so be it. What Phoenix needed, if he was ever going to generate pressure enough to motivate Cyrus to hand over the Dragon's Tooth, was a Smith or two as hostages. A Smith, or possibly the Boone girl. Antigone and Diana Boone were out of reach, somewhere with Rupert Greeves, but Daniel and Katie Smith had both been on this ship, and the game of hide and seek they were now playing below decks could not last forever. Phoenix would have his hostages, and Cyrus's heart would be in his hands. Which meant, soon thereafter, Phoenix would once again possess the Dragon's Tooth. And with the tooth, he could once again transcend mortals and transmortals alike. Phoenix had dwelt in the ashes long enough. A fiery resurrection and ascendency was coming.

A wet sneeze ripped out of Oliver's face before he had time to cover it.

The room was clean enough, hardly dusty at all, with a simple workbench and shelves holding glass vials and antique tools. Nothing to trigger this level of reaction. The fruit trees and flowers on the ship's deck outside had not even whispered to his allergies, so he couldn't blame pollen. No, this was something else.

Oliver swung his feet down onto the steel floor and shut his burning eyes. The woman must have had a cat. Enough reason to kill her on sight when his Reborn pulled her out of whatever hole she was hiding in below decks.

Another sneeze. And another, and one more, like trumpets leading a great parade of tears and mucus out of his face.

There were times when Phoenix forgot his anger about choosing Oliver as his new body. There were times when he promised himself another physical upgrade, and soon. In those moments, the tiny spark that still remained of Oliver's consciousness would perk up inside him with variations on a very simple question: *what about me?*

It would have been easy enough for Phoenix to correct Oliver's allergies before he had moved in. He had done plenty of that kind of work on others, even if clumsily. But now that he had taken up residency in his nephew, he would have to find some way to exit Oliver in order to work on improving him, in order to move back in. And that process was impossible until after he recovered the Dragon's Tooth and even then, only if he found another blood relative to temporarily inhabit. And if he found another blood relative, then why move back into Oliver at all?

Would I die? Oliver's ghost wondered inside him. *Forever?*

Phoenix didn't answer. Why should he? Oliver would only get louder if he encouraged him with conversation. A totally mute Oliver was preferable. Totally mute and allergy free.

The room's steel hatch squealed opened across from the couch, and a tall young man ducked inside with a rifle on his back. He was dressed in black fatigues, but his arms were bare to the shoulder—bare, muscled beneath a tangle of veins, and tinted green like young grass. He stood up straight, stared into the middle distance above the couch, and cleared his throat. His name had once been James. Phoenix had renamed him Beetle, after the successful enzyme experiment in the young man's gut. Beetle was the first of Phoenix's Reborn to be able to digest wood and

bark without complication. Paired with his photosynthetic skin, food and energy were never a problem.

"Well?" Oliver asked, sniffing.

"They launched a boat," Beetle said.

"A boat," Oliver repeated. "A raft? A lifeboat? How many are in it? They can't have gotten far. Are the flyers up?"

"Only one flyer is still intact," the green man answered. "And there is no way to know how many have escaped or how far they have gone."

Oliver stood up, feeling the veins in his temples begin to twitch. This was not possible. Unless he captured some members of the Smith family, he had no leverage over Cyrus at all. He needed Smiths, and he needed them alive. There had been eyes watching this boat well before his flyers had attacked, and without ceasing for the hours before his own plane had touched down on the deck.

"Explain," Oliver said. He took a step toward Beetle, clenching both fists as he looked up at the worried face of the much taller man. Beetle's green, stubbled jaw was slick with sweat. Behind the tall man, Oliver's focus settled on a small photo just above the clutter of tools on the work bench. Lemon Chauncey was in the foreground, leaning backward with an awkward smile and her arms raised in the act of taking a selfie. Behind her, the couch was buried beneath a pile of orange carpets.

"We used plasma blades to cut our way below decks until we reached the rising flood," Beetle said. "After diving, we discovered why the ship is sinking. A chamber had been opened below the water line to launch what appears to have been a small submarine. No more than twenty meters long."

"Appears to have been?" Oliver asked.

"Yes," Beetle said. "Because it launched under water."

"Clever genius," Oliver snapped, and immediately tried to ice his anger, focusing his thoughts. "I'm so proud of you for working that out." Phoenix's mind whipped through his options. He had a plane, birds, and at least one functional flyer. He could try to spot the sub from above. Twenty meters was not large, so it likely had a limited range. But how deep could it dive? Flying around staring at the water could be a complete waste of time.

"You have saltwater gills," Oliver said. "How many others survived?"

"I—" Beetle began. "I'm not sure."

"Get in the water," Oliver said. "All of you. Now. Get me a direction at least."

Beetle nodded and ducked back through the hatch, leaving it open behind him.

Oliver sniffed and closed his itching eyes. A submarine? Lemon Chauncey's eccentric reputation had been well established in the Order of Brendan. There had been a time when Phoenix would have considered her a potential ally. He never would have considered her to be a strategist or a long-term thinker. But a submarine? Prepared and waiting? Had her paranoia grown that strong? Was that all this was?

Oliver pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes before opening them wide and blinking. As his focus sharpened, he stared at Lemon's selfie and at the carpets piled on the couch in the background. Only… they were not piled carpets. In the middle of a great matt of orange hair, he could see a leathery bundle of banana-sized fingers. And what he had at first taken for a pillow was clearly a wide moon face. Both eyes were shut in slumber and a heavy lip sagged beneath the sleeping creature's open mouth.

"You horrible, horrible woman," Oliver said aloud. "Apes on the sofa?"

Oliver sniffed. And Oliver sneezed.

Even in normal circumstances, Antigone Smith disliked climbing perfectly vertical ladders. In her opinion, all ladders should lean. But at night, climbing inside a tight shaft lit only by dying firelight in the tower's belfry high above her, with an awkward bundle of wood stacked on her left arm while she groped for unevenly distributed rungs with her right, dislike did not begin to describe her feelings. Antigone hated and feared the upright ladder she was climbing as much as she had hated or feared anything since joining the Order of Brendan. Her sweat was cold despite the warmth of the night. Her heart was fluttering like a wounded butterfly, and her legs were trembling with worry more than fatigue. All of which stirred up a great deal of anger inside her, anger at her weariness and weakness, anger at her fear of the shaft and the ladder and the task she had been given. The anger is why she was biting her lower lip so hard that it was now bleeding into a pool beneath her tongue. And anger is why she still hadn't noticed, even as she neared the end of her journey.

The uneven ladder rungs were thick, rough-hewn, rotten to her touch, and soft and fraying against the palm of her right hand every time she gripped and pulled. Antigone kept her feet wide and away from the middle of each rung as she climbed. And despite warning herself not to, she looked down between her feet at the distant moonlit ground with every new step. If Rupert hadn't already ascended and descended twice, she never would have believed the decaying wood could hold her weight, let alone his. Logic told Antigone that she should already have splattered in that rocky pool of moonlight beneath her. It told her that she still might. But instead, with each grunting heave and cautious shuffle of her feet, the firelight in the open hatch above her grew closer.

Rupert had still been reading in a crouch when he had sent Antigone for one more load of firewood, reading a little journal with yellow pages and a heavily scarred leather binding, and comparing what he saw there with scrawling on a vellum scroll he had taken from the library in the manor house.

"I'm done, Rupe," Antigone said as she neared the hatch. "Can't do it again."

Rupert didn't answer.

Not too surprising. Not answering was one of Rupert's favorite responses, especially when he was reading. Antigone expected nothing to have changed when her head finally rose through the hatch and heaved her load of firewood onto the belfry's plank flooring.

"Rupe!" Antigone said, stretching out her hand for help. "Rupe?"

The big man was barefoot, shirtless, and stretched out on his face on the belfry floor below the three empty and oddly rectangular bells hanging from the beam above him. The little fire Rupert had kindled in a wide brass bowl on a stone hearth in the far wall was still bright enough to make his dark skin shine. Every scar on Rupert's thick arms and knotted back stood out, throwing harsh shadows.

Antigone remained in the hatch, taking in the scene. The three bells had been dusted. As had the floor. Rupert's shirt, having served as a makeshift cleaning rag, was now in a pile against the rear wall with his boots and socks. The three bronze Tongues of Borodon were laid out evenly in front of Rupert, hooked shafts pointed toward him, the heavy knobs toward the bells. Two still bore slight traces of an oily black stain—the two Wiglaf had used as weapons against the Naga in the wood. Rupert's little leather book and the scroll had been set to his left, beside the Captain's Dracul blade.

If Rupert hadn't been whispering into the floor, Antigone could have believed that he was unconscious. As it was, she felt like she was interrupting something intensely personal…and religious.

After a long minute, in which Rupert's whispering grew louder, the Avengel finally rose to his knees and looked at Antigone. His back and shoulders glistened with sweat while his chest and forehead were coated with dust. His eyes were bright with life and firelight.

"It's time to choose," Rupert said. "I have said my prayers, and that is all that I can do. I cannot make myself wiser. Nor can I make this moment more holy or more fraught."

"What do you mean?" Antigone asked.

Rupert tapped the little leather journal next to him. "The Avengels before me knew only of three bells and three tongues that had been plucked by Brendan and set ringing in the towers of Ashtown. And they prophesy significant woe should any fool try to ring them out of order."

Antigone looked up at the bells, suspended from the beam in front

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of Rupert. There were three, rough and dusty and shaped with the simplicity of giant cowbells. In terms of size, they reminded Antigone of the five-gallon buckets she and Daniel had once used beneath the many leaks in The Archer Motel.

Rupert picked up the scroll. "But here, written first in Ge'ez, but translated into Latin—and slightly modified—on the reverse side of the vellum, four bells are described, not three. The promise is of deliverance from serpents, venom, witches and wizards, and the binding of every great worm where the fires burn without light. But it adds a similar warning about ringing the bells in order, along with a command to do so barefoot, with head uncovered, and without uncleanness."

Antigone looked at Rupert's filthy, dust-coated chest and forehead. "Uncleanness?" she asked.

Rupert laughed. "Uncleanness of heart and spirit," he said, smiling. "I hope. I've done some inner scrubbing, I promise."

Antigone climbed all the way up into the belfry and studied the bells. They were so very plain and unassuming, without any unique markings that she could see. "What does it say about the order?" she asked.

"Literally, 'the bells must speak as they have spoken.'" Rupert looked down at the scroll and then back up at the bells. "Likely an idiom of some sort."

"And if you do it wrong?" Antigone asked. "What woe should we expect?"

Rupert held up the scroll. "In this version, the wrong order means no deliverance. Simple failure." He set the scroll down and picked up the little book. "In this one, the wrong order results in destruction of mind and body, and the waking of soul-devourers and dragon spawn. Thorough and extensive desolation."

"Ah," Antigone said. She tucked her hair back behind her ears and scrunched her mouth to the side like she had in another life when a math problem confused her. "And there are centuries between those two warnings?"

"A millennium," Rupert said. "At the least."

"And which one do you believe?" she asked.

"Both," Rupert answered. "These bells must be rung in order. An order I cannot possibly discern."

Diana Boone stood on the flagstone patio behind the manor house, looking down over the jagged ruins of the ancient city below. The moonlight gave the broken walls of the empty city a look of restless and uneasy death that made Diana feel as if she was standing on untrustworthy ground. The distant cries of known and unknown animals did not make her more comfortable.

Diana's arms were crossed, and the fingers on her right hand were fluttering with involuntary energy. Most of the other travelers from Ashtown would have found their beds not long after Rupert and Antigone had left, but Diana knew that sleep would be impossible for her tonight.

Too many times, in the field alone or trekking with others, Diana Boone had felt the same tingling between her shoulder blades and on the back of her neck that she felt now. That feeling was why her fingers were fluttering and her right foot was beginning to quake on the wet stone. She had felt this way before a frozen lake had given way beneath her brother's feet, before a mudslide had obliterated the camp site her father had chosen but that she had refused, before an engine had failed her on a training flight and she'd been forced to ditch in Lake Michigan. Diana had felt this way before the talons of a giant cave owl had pierced her shoulder from above, and she had felt this way the first night after she'd met Cyrus and Antigone Smith. Robert Boone had always attributed Diana's ominous instincts to her mother's ancient Irish Traveler blood, but as much as he had made fun of little Diana for her worries, for the weight in her gut and the crawling of her skin, Robert had learned to trust his daughter's instincts as much Diana had. And right now, as uneasy as Diana felt, there was nothing that she could think to change. They were already here and being here was the problem. Was the bell tower going to collapse with Rupert and Antigone in it? Were their unwilling hosts going to attempt to kill them in their beds? Or would they somehow betray their location to Radu Bey and leave the killing to the transmortals?

Diana Boone felt like she was being watched by something close and impending. She felt as if she had already stepped into a trap, but one she could not quite understand. She felt like a child who had cranked the Jack-in-the-box too far already, well past the point where the music should have stopped and the clown should have exploded free with cackling glee. Diana felt as if her heart was due to leap at any minute, at any second, when whatever clown was coiled beneath them all came springing free. Whatever it was, it was coming, it was coming tonight, and Diana Boone knew there was nothing she could do to stop it.

Diana heard the French doors open behind her and two heavy sets of footsteps joined her on the dew-soaked stone. A moment later, Wiglaf and Niffy flanked her, the bulky monk to her right, and the bearded Scylfing towering on her left. The smell of the two men merged around her, and Diana instinctively began to breathe through her mouth. After a long day of heat followed by laughter over a great deal of food, the smell of the two men reminded Diana of standing between a pair of pack horses after days on the trail. Somehow, Wiglaf was still wearing his large wool sweater, despite the African heat.

Niffy sniffed loudly and spat into the darkness.

"Thanks for sharing," Diana said without looking at the monk. Her eyes were on a small shadow moving in the belfry—Antigone's silhouette—and the curling smoke climbing away in the moonlight. Diana wondered where Rupert was. He should have been much easier to spot in the tower than Antigone.

"That's how I feel about this place and no apology," Niffy said. "Words just wouldn't do what spittle could."

"I don't disagree," Diana said. "I don't like the people, I don't like the place, and I don't like whatever it is that Rupert is doing right now."

"He's placing a wager," Wiglaf said. "As great a wager as any Avengel has placed in centuries. To ring the bells that have hung silent since Brendan plucked their tongues, to wake those who were meant to sleep until the last trumps and the final struggle? They will not be pleased, and they will not wake alone."

"But they should be allies?" Diana asked. "They are meant to be friends?"

"When a game of chess straddles centuries," Wiglaf said, "light and darkness both work stratagems. In a much shorter struggle, there are wasps who lay their eggs inside the young of butterflies. When the young ones, plump and ready, enter their small coffins, they expect to rise with wings and the beauty of flying flowers. Instead, when the time comes, a wasp emerges, having devoured and replaced the butterfly before it could even begin. So it is with dragons. They have had centuries to plant their own seeds to counter Brendan's, awaiting their own call, or ours. There will be butterflies, yes, but the wasps may be more numerous when the bells ring."

"In his cups, the old Cryptkeeper at Monasterboice told gory and gruesome tales of those bells," Niffy said. "He said Brendan had separated them forever. And for good reason."

Diana exhaled long and slow. "What do we do then?" she asked. "Besides wait for dragon wasps?"

Niffy didn't answer. Wiglaf exhaled, long and slow.

"Where did Rupert leave the frames he carried from the Room of Ways?" Diana asked. "We should choose one and have it ready."

Cyrus had been wedged out of sight behind a massive stone pillar for almost five minutes, when he decided that he may as well have a look while he waited for Ringan to return. He had not expected the church to be full when they had pulled open the giant wooden doors and walked right in. Although, it wasn't full. Not hardly. But it was in use.

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Cyrus pressed his chest against the stone ribs of the pillar and leaned just far enough to the right to see the back rows sparsely filled with the stragglers of the gray-haired congregation seated in rickety wooden folding chairs. He leaned a bit further and a large pulpit mounted on a pillar up front came into view, complete with narrow winding staircase. But that pulpit was a just a decoy, functioning more like an open air closet, storing a cluster of black music stands, brooms, and microphones. No one was looking at the pillar-mounted pulpit. Every eye in the congregation was focused center front, where a frail woman in a clerical collar paced the stone floor behind an even more frail, butter-colored lectern. Her hair was metallic gray, trimmed tight on the sides, but left floppy on top. Her cheeks were concave, like she was sucking on something sour, but she was still wearing a smile. The woman paused behind the lectern, consulting her notes with the appearance of great contemplation while her turquoise earrings rocked in place against the sharp, delicate line of her jaw.

"Such stories and metaphors had their place once, surely," the woman said, returning to her slow pacing, sharing her permanent smile with every congregant in turn. "Such stories were, no doubt, useful in their time and in their culture of origin. They may even continue to be useful this very afternoon, when footer is on the telly, and the commentators are groping to fill the time till first touch. But which team is David and which is Goliath? Who among us has any right to declare such a thing, and what would it even mean if we did? And tell me this…" The woman stood still, interlocked her thin fingers in front of her, and looked straight up into Cyrus's eyes. The contact was sudden and as physical as if they had collided on a street corner or in a shop. Cyrus couldn't make himself move or look away. Even across the large sanctuary, he felt as if he had locked eyes with a maternal bird of prey, a falcon or a hawk, perched on her nest. For the woman's part, she cocked her head in curiosity at the boy peering at her from behind the pillar. Somehow, she finished her thought despite the surprise, and without looking away.

"Does not every Goliath, have, in turn, his own Goliath? And who is to say that Goliath's Goliath was not a young, ruddy shepherd boy? Imagine being a great big ox of a lad, completely apart from your own choosing, and so being shoved out in front of the army all dressed up like some kind of monster. 'But they have an agile little lad, fighting fit and as quick as lightning with the stones!' One might have said. 'Just because I'm a Goliath doesn't mean I'm not frightened!'"

"Cyrus!" Ringan hissed behind him.

Cyrus jerked back behind the pillar and looked down at the grate in the wall behind his feet. Ringan's face was grinning up at him from behind the decorative brass.

"Past the cloister," Ringan whispered. "There's any easier vent for you just behind the biscuit table. Through the door to the left of the congregation. I'll meet you there."

Ringan's face vanished back into the darkness beyond the grate.

"Wait," Cyrus said, but Ringan's face vanished back into the darkness beyond the grate. "Hold on…"

Cyrus had no desire to reestablish contact with the woman pacing in front of the congregation. Crouching down, he hooked his fingers though the brass grill covering the vent, and he gave it a tug. Not even a wobble.

"Fine," Cyrus said. Without giving himself more time to think about it, he stood perfectly upright, squared his shoulders, and stepped out from behind the pillar.

Until that moment, he had not given much thought to his wardrobe. Why would he? But as he identified the large wooden door on the congregation's left, and as he began to walk toward it, collecting more glances and more stares as he went, his wardrobe moved to the front of his mind for the first time in he didn't even know how long.

For the most part, Cyrus was still in the clothes he had been wearing at the siege of Ashtown, the clothes he had been wearing when he had snatched the Dragon's Tooth from Oliver Laughlin's hand and been riddled with ineffective bullets in response. The bullet holes were no longer present in his skin, but they were still very much present in his linen safari shirt. His pocketed shorts had been torn and frayed and stained every kind of green and brown by weeks of climbing and sliding through the jungle, and the soles of his boots were a shambles, flopping and skidding awkwardly on the cathedral's stone pavers as he walked.

Patricia was invisibly still and cool around Cyrus's neck, but she tightened in response to his uneasiness, snugging the empty silver tooth sheath up between his collarbones even as Cyrus placed his hand over the silver knob on the broken cane tucked into his belt.

But the time Cyrus had reached the large wooden door, the woman up front only had eyes for him. When Cyrus grabbed the iron ring set in the middle of the oversized door, and he dragged the heavy thing open, hinges that had first needed oil centuries ago filled the cathredral's vault with piercing echoes of ancient iron agony. Even the deafest members of the congregation forgot that a sermon was being attempted and focused their attention on Cyrus.

The woman up front surrendered. "Can we be of service?" she asked with an unconvincing smile.

Cyrus smiled and gave the congregation a small bow. "Sorry about that," he said. "I was never here." And then Cyrus gave an encore of the hinge song as he shuffled backward through the doorway, slowly pulling the weighty door closed behind him, shielding himself from the collective gaze of the gray-haired congregation.

The cloister, Cyrus assumed, was the little courtyard garden and gurgling fountain surrounded by a pillared walkway. He assumed this because just beyond it, he found a large hall, a stout woman in a cream-colored cardigan sweater made for someone much stouter, and a single table draped in a white tablecloth and holding plates of chalky looking sugar cookies, shortbread, and platters of cinnamon sugar coffee cake cut into cubes and stacked in pyramids.

The coffee cake was still giving off steam where it had been cut, and the stout, cardiganed woman was focusing primarily on the construction of more pyramids.

"Hello, love," the woman said, assessing him. "I'm Grace. You look as if you've had a rough go. Are you new to the island? Do you need a roof?"

Cyrus nodded. And then shook his head. "New, yes," he said. "But I'm okay, thanks."

"I expect Sister Anna will be done soon," Grace said. "And her little flock of seagulls will emerge expecting biscuits. So, you might as well grab what you fancy now, before the swarm!"

"Sister Anna?" Cyrus asked. The coffee cake was calling to him, and he moved toward the table. "Is she a nun?"

"Oh no," Grace said. "She's my sister. I don't fancy what she serves, but sheep do need to eat, especially after nonsense, so I bring the biscuits around."

Cyrus picked up a cube of coffee cake and hesitated, savoring the smell.

"Go on then," Grace said, smiling.

Cyrus bit off half of his entire piece of cake as metal scraped loudly on stone beneath the table. Grace lost interest in Cyrus, frowned, and began to lift the tablecloth.

"Hold on," Cyrus said, tucking the rest of the cake into his cheek. "Can I ask a favor?"

Grace shrugged. "You can ask, love. But I'll make you no promises."

"Sure," Cyrus said, muffled and chewing. "Actually, two favors. Or more like a question and then a favor."

Grace smiled and let the tablecloth drop. "Spit it out, love. But chew and swallow first."

"First," Cyrus said, and he swallowed, sending soft, warm perfection scraping sugar down his throat. "How many pieces of this cake can I take? I haven't eaten in a while, and it's fantastic."

"As many as you can eat without paining yourself," Grace said. "And what's the favor?"

"Can I please hide under the table before anyone else comes?" Cyrus

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asked. "I don't really want to talk to any of those people. I don't even want them to see me."

Grace considered this while assessing Cyrus's clothes, from his boots to his collar.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," Grace said. "Life's done you one, but why should you have to hide when others don't?"

The piercing echo of antique hinges announced that the service had ended. The sound of muffled voices and shuffling feet followed soon after.

Cyrus grabbed four more pieces of coffee cake, hugged them to his chest with his left arm, and dropped to the floor on his three available limbs.

"How about this?" Cyrus asked. "I'm hiding under the table. Please don't tell."

He gave Grace his biggest and best smile, and he scrambled through the draped table cloth and out of sight. A brass grate was lying on the floor, and Ringan's face was waiting for him in the large vent opening. The old woman smiled.

"She's lovely, isn't she?" Ringan whispered. "Grace was always the sweet sister."

Wriggling into the vent opening and dropping through into the damp tunnel wasn't too difficult, although some of the cake was crushed. By the time Ringan had led Cyrus through a winding maze of tunnels—over and around small pools and chips wrappers and beer glass and even the occasional skull—and into a wide, low-ceilinged room filled with large stone sarcophagi of various sizes and colors, Cyrus had managed to ingest all of the cake and had even consumed the sugar and cinnamon from every fingertip. Which is why he was able to give the room his full attention.

The stone caskets, if that's what they were, were not in uniform rows. They were all radiating out from something in the center of the room that looked like an iron roost for an enormous bird. But instead of a bird, the roost held a single bell. The bell had simple lines, more rectangular than swooping, but it was not small.

"Welcome to the Garden of Kings," Ringan said. "Some have said all sixty will rise for the last struggle when that bell has been struck. But on which side, I ask you. Others believe only Brendan's seed will rise to face the dragons, but the look of your face and the weave of your name tells me that you and I will soon know for sure. But realize, once you've struck this bell, it will never ring again. Nor will the sleepers ever find the will to rise at your call."

Diana Boone was on her knees on a Persian carpet in the bedroom she had been assigned. Three empty picture frames leaned against the wall in front of her, beneath a row of windows. Studied closely, all three frames still bore webbed black veins, traces of old lightning scarring in the trees that had provided the wood.

Niffy sat on Diana's bed, watching her study the frames. Wiglaf had refused to leave his watch over the ruined city.

"Which do you think?" Diana asked. "If we have to run, which would be best?"

"Least worst, more like," Niffy said.

"Fine," Diana said. "Which would be the least worst?"

"I think you already know your own mind, and if it comes right down to it, and Rupe isn't making the decision, won't your own mind be what you follow?"

"Don't talk like that," Diana said.

"I'm not," Niffy said. "You're the one asking questions that aren't for the likes of—"

A single bell rang, long and piercing and alone—beautiful and lost, yearning, piercing, and searching.

"It's done then," Niffy said. But it wasn't done. The sound was growing louder, building, hunting, heaping up on itself like a wave rolling in from a stormy sea.

The floor began to tremble beneath Diana's knees. The plaster in the ceiling began to crack. A bedside lamp exploded.

Niffy covered his ears, grimacing.

Shouts echoed throughout the house, chased by the tumbling of heavy feet.

And still the bell grew until it was as deep as thunder and as sharp as ice. The row of windows above Diana's head exploded in unison, and she curled over her knees, covering her head as glass rained down.

The room swayed. Books tumbled from their shelves. Niffy slipped off the bed and thumped onto the floor beside Diana, bouncing with the glass.

Wiglaf was not surprised when the bell rang. As the sound grew, doubling and trebling in pulsing throbs, he gripped the bottom of his heavy sweater, pulled it off over his head, and tossed it onto an iron patio table. Bare-chested, but still in his leather kilt and high boots with wooly socks, he walked to the edge of the grass and crossed his log-thick arms.

The serpent blister in the Scylfing's massive chest expanded and spun, writhing with excitement, tinting the darkness with a golden glow.

"Wait," Wiglaf said aloud.

The serpent rippled, bulged, and leapt beneath his skin, pulsing light down the slope across stooping grass.

"Not yet," Wiglaf said. Behind him glass began to shatter, shards spilled down onto flagstones, splintering on impact, more raining down around the big man from every upper window. Glass skittered off his shoulders and back, lodging in his hair and his beard, but he did not move, not until the hillside began to bulge and ripple in giant rings.

Wiglaf watched as more than a dozen bulging rings appeared in the soil and turf like the wide lips of craters, each more than thirty feet across. Around the rings, hundreds of fleshy gray spheres began to emerge like giant mushrooms. The spheres were heads, followed by shoulders and chests and then arms and splaying, long-fingered claws. Wiglaf had seen such soulless fungal creatures before, but never in such numbers. As they rose from the earth, they were all attached—chest to back and skull to skull—but when free of the soil, the men tore themselves apart, revealing smooth, damp faces and mouths rimmed with fangs.

Hundreds of the mushroom men turned down toward the ruined city, stumbling toward the firelit tower and the still ringing bell. Hundreds of others turned up the hill toward Wiglaf and the house behind him. Those nearest the top flipped back their gray heads, revealing larger second mouths where jaw met throat, snarling and gurgling at the Scylfing through rows of sharklike teeth.

The golden serpent in Wiglaf's chest strained against his skin as he reached into the pouch in the front of his kilt, drew out a pinch of powder in his fingertips, and placed it beneath his tongue.

Wiglaf's golden beard grew white with heat, like fine wire in a forge. The serpent in his skin did the same, twisting and tangling in the agony of anticipation.

"Now," Wiglaf said simply, and with a burst of light as bright as dayfire, he was gone.

Where Wiglaf had stood one moment before, now a golden, two-legged dragon preened six clawed wings. Larger than a rhino, with a spined head like a crocodilian horse, the creature snorted white sparks out of its nostrils, fanned its wings, and dragged its heavy body down onto the grass. A tail longer than a train car and spined with flames lashed through the shattered glass on the patio and then snapped toward the first wave of mushroom men with a crack like thunder.

And still the bell rang. Alone.

END OF CHAPTER 14

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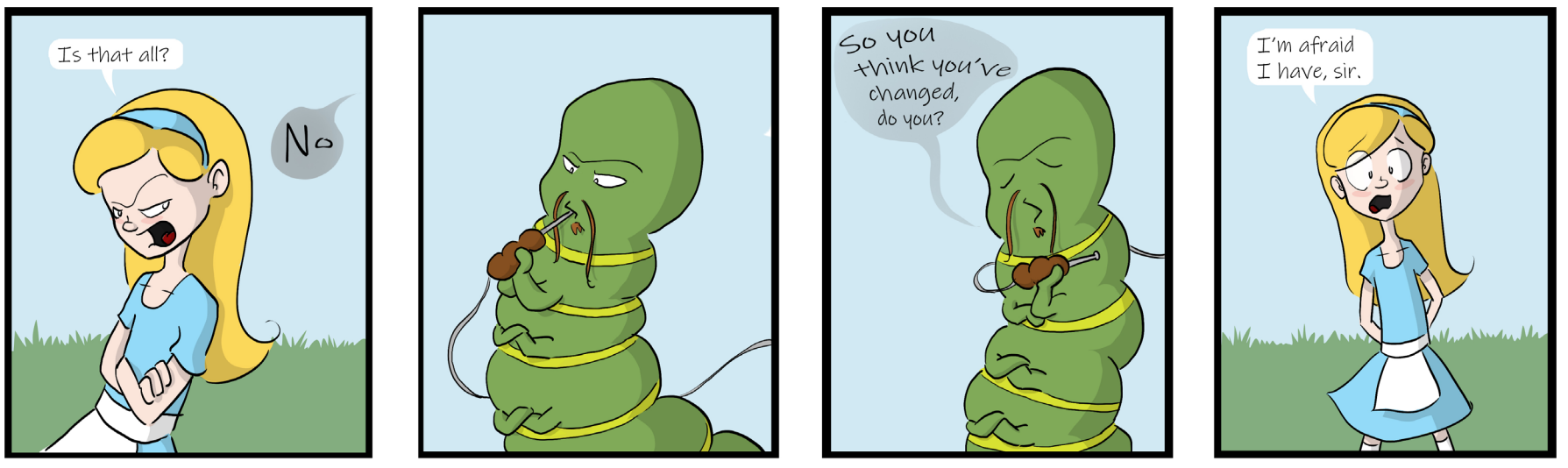
THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN


Is that all?
No
So you think you've changed, do you?
I'm afraid I have, sir.
I can't remember things as I used to- and I dont stay the same size for ten minutes together!
Can't remember what things?
Well, I tried to say "How Doth The Busy Bee" but it all came out different!
Recite 'You Are Old Father William'

"You are old, Father William," the young man said,
"And your hair has become very white;
And yet you incessantly stand on your head—
Do you think, at your age, it is right?"

"In my youth," Father William replied to his son,
"I feared it might injure my brain;
But now that I'm perfectly sure I have none,
Why, I do it again and again."

"You are old," said the youth, "one would hardly suppose
That your eye is as steady as ever;
Yet you balanced an eel on the end of your nose—
What made you so awfully clever?"

"I have answered one question, and that is enough,"
Said his father; "don't give yourself airs!
Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff?
Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs!"

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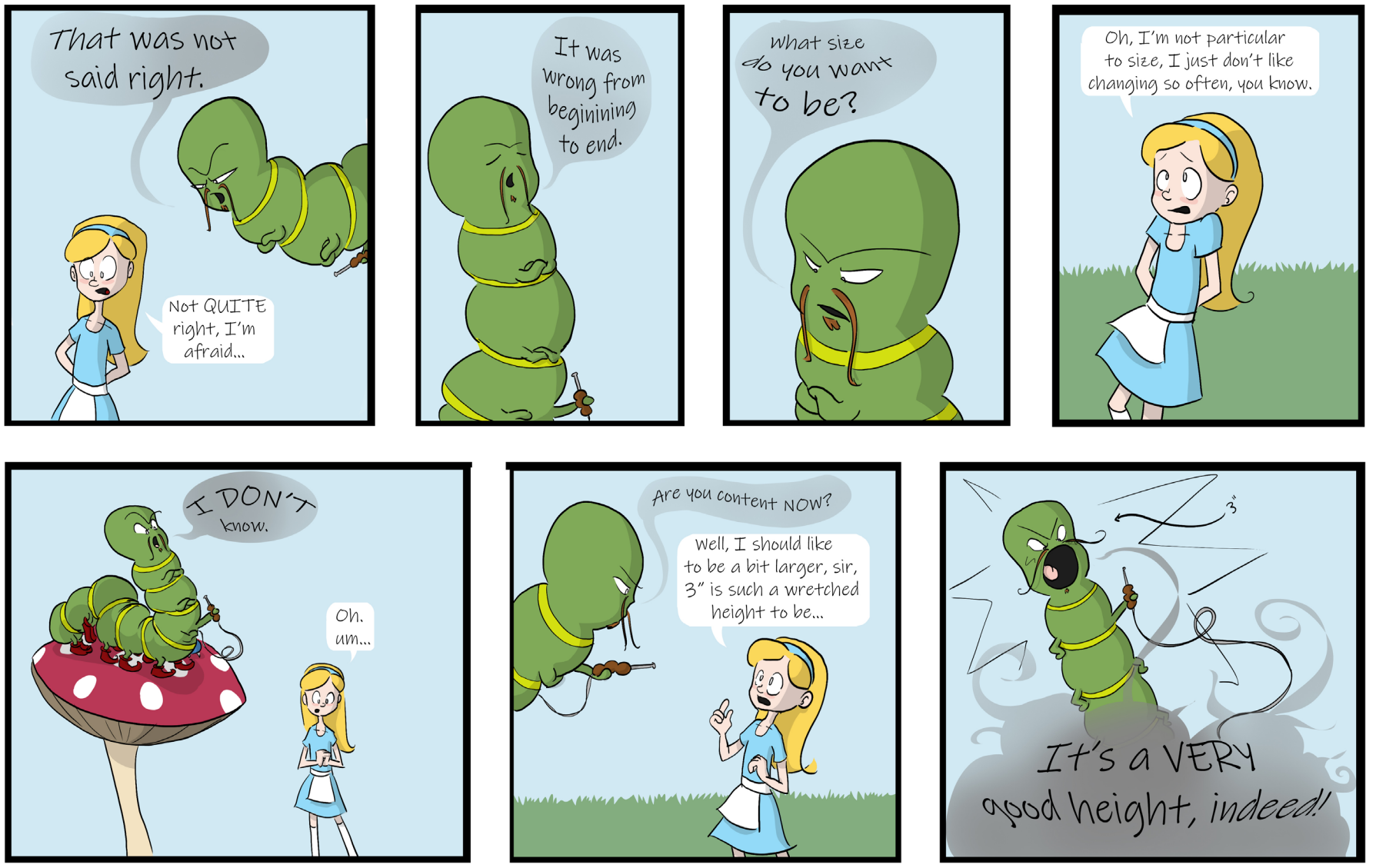
That was not said right.
Not QUITE right, I'm afraid...
It was wrong from beginining to end.
What size do you want to be?
Oh, I'm not particular to size, I just don't like changing so often, you know.
I DON'T know.
Oh. um...
Are you content NOW?
Well, I should like to be a bit larger, sir, 3" is such a wretched height to be...
3"
It's a VERY good height, indeed!
But I'm not used to it! I wish you all weren't so easisly offended!
You'll get used to it.
One side makes you tall
and one makes you short.
clunk
clunk
clunk
One side of what?
The mushroom.
Huh.
And now which is which?

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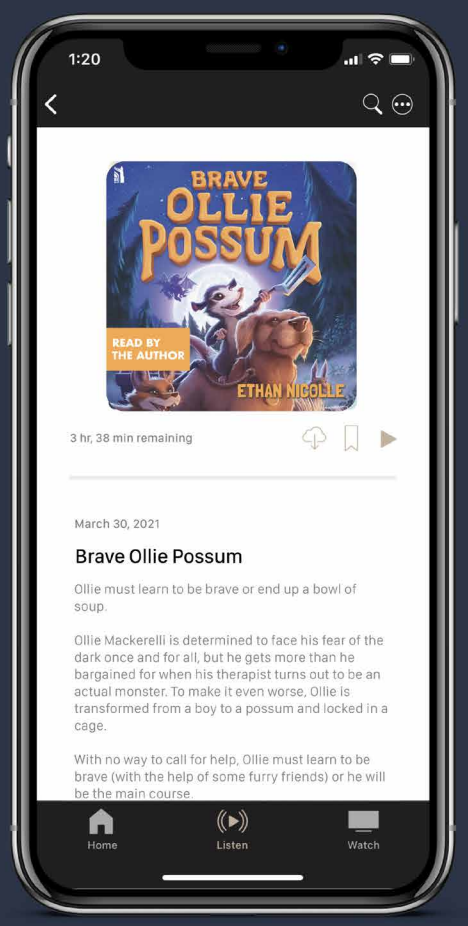
CHAPTER 14

THE SILENT BELLS OF ASHTOWN BURIALS

AN ORDER OF THE BRENDAN BOOK

SERIAL EDITION

CHAPTER 14


1:20
BRAVE OLLIE POSSUM
READ BY THE AUTHOR
ETHAN NICOLLE
3 hr, 38 min remaining
March 30, 2021
Brave Ollie Possum
Ollie must learn to be brave or end up a bowl of soup.
Ollie Mackerelli is determined to face his fear of the dark once and for all, but he gets more than he bargained for when his therapist turns out to be an actual monster. To make it even worse, Ollie is transformed from a boy to a possum and locked in a cage.
With no way to call for help, Ollie must learn to be brave (with the help of some furry friends) or he will be the main course.
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The Silent Bells

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

SERPENT RAIN

THE LONE BELL WAS STILL RINGING, BUZZING Antigone's bones and clanging in her ears without any sign of quieting. If Antigone survived the night, she knew her hearing would never be the same. But she had worse things to worry about at the moment. The two iron bell tongues hanging in Antigone's hands were not meant to be used as weapons, but they were heavy enough, like primitive hammers, and she had seen Wiglaf splatter Naga skulls with them. So, when a slippery, gray-skinned man lunged past Rupert and tumbled onto the planks at Antigone's feet, snapping at her shins with two mouths, she didn't hesitate. Antigone swung both iron clangers as hard as she was able, crushing the hairless gray skull against the floor and splattering bloodless mushroom flesh across her feet. But she didn't even have time to be disgusted.

"Go on, Tigs!" Rupert yelled. "Ring the bells!"

The stone walls of the belfry were open below the beamed ceiling, and snarling, gray mushroom men with extra toothy mouths in their throats were spilling in over those walls on all four sides. Rupert Greeves was still barefoot, still shirtless, and still striped with old scars exaggerated by the firelight, but the pale dust that had coated his skin when he'd prostrated himself on the belfry floor was now a sloppy paste, a chalky sweat mud running down his dark skin.

Rupert leapt past Antigone, Dracul blade gripped in both hands. He had not stopped moving since the first wave of climbers had scaled the tower. A flash of steel unevenly trimmed a row of invading fungal arms and heads. Jaws still snapping, the heads landed like pumpkins on the belfry planks, and Rupert kicked them into the piles of mushroom flesh already mounded in the corners. Antigone shuffled in place, kicking fungus off her feet.

There was only one way that this could end.

The grim reality of the situation began gumming up the gears in Antigone's mind. Her limbs were heavy, her fears deadened to numbness. Her brain was working just well enough to realize that she must be in shock. This must be what it felt like to be the rabbit surrounded by coyotes, the seal swarmed by sharks, the deer staring into the bright eyes of an eighteen-wheeler.

It felt like…nothing. Adrenaline had spiked too high and tripped something inside her.

"Antigone!" Rupert shouted, "Now! Get them ringing!"

Rupe jumped back in the other direction, to the tower ladder in the floor hatch. Rupert's blade hissed, severing another head and two claws on the top rung. The mushroom carcass tumbled back down the crowded shaft. "And don't let the teeth touch you, Tigs! Ever!"

Teeth. Antigone looked at the nearest creature crawling in over the wall of the belfry. Teeth. There were so many—sharp and gray and small in the more human mouth above the jaw, but enormous and sharky when the creature lolled its head back to gape a much larger mouth where jaw met throat.

Rupert and his blade were not slowing. If they had, Antigone would have been torn to pieces within a few seconds.

The subject of Antigone's study was suddenly split in two—from scalp to stomach—by Rupert's blade. The creature had no guts. No blood. Just slimy, white and gray mushroom flesh, releasing a cold smell like the center of a damp and rotting log.

And then Rupert slapped Antigone's face. Not hard enough to knock her down or knock her out—which he could have done. Just hard enough to snap her head to the side and set her cheek on fire. And then he moved on.

Blood streamed out of Antigone's nose, and she blinked her watering eyes into focus.

Right. Feeling flooded back through her, bringing fear with it. She couldn't be in shock right now. Shock was for weak little girls who got eaten. Not for Smiths.

"Stay in the fight," she said aloud, and she could see Captain John Smith's laughing eyes as she did.

Stay in the fight, the Captain had said. Until ye hear the angels sing.

There were no angels. Not yet. At least not louder than the bell.

Spitting a mouthful of gloppy blood onto the planks, and trusting that Rupert would chop and kick and kill any snapping mouths that came her way, Antigone finally managed to focus on the two remaining empty bells, and the heavy iron tongues in her hands.

Did it matter which tongue went with which bell? Did anything really matter at this point? She was stuck in a tower surrounded by thousands of fresh-born, fungal monsters. What could bells do, really? A bell had caused this whole problem in the first place. What she needed was a flamethrower.

Antigone reached up the square skirt of the bell on her right, fishing for an iron loop with the heavy tongue in her hand. The tongue lurched into place like a magnet, strong enough to tug her off balance. But there wasn't time to investigate. Turning her attention to the last bell, she found its iron loop, and the last tongue did the same, jumping home in her hands.

Rupert had made a big deal about choosing the correct bell to ring first, but the situation had changed. Antigone placed her palms flat on the two bell skirts and gave them both a shove. The bell on her left was as solid and immovable as a stone column. The bell on her right swung easily, and the second tongue of Borodon pealed in its ancient home for the first time in centuries, doubling the song of its brother.

Antigone shoved the third bell again, but it wouldn't budge.

And then two long-fingered hands closed around Antigone's throat and flung her down onto her back.

The world went silent. No bells. No snarling. Antigone didn't even hear her own screaming. The creature snapped at her throat, but she elbowed it in the side of its head before throwing her arms up over her face. The creature went straight for her exposed side, lolling its head back, clamping its massive, armored throat mouth around her ribs. Cold teeth, dozens of them, ripped into her, worming between her ribs, burrowing for her lungs.

The creature began to shake Antigone like a dog with a toy.

Someone was singing.

Who was that? Antigone wondered. It was a man's voice. Growing louder. Closer.

Her father. Her father was singing a Gaelic song she hadn't heard him sing since she'd been tiny, riding on his shoulders as he hiked the cliffs above a raging California sea after the rain. She was riding on those shoulders now. She could smell the salt on the cold wind and feel the scratch of his unshaven jaw against her hands.

"English," she had shouted at him. "I want to sing!"

Lawrence Smith switched to English.

Antigone Smith joined in.

Rupert had expected the first bell to spring a trap of some sort. When he had humbled himself, prostrate on the floor of the belfry, Antigone had believed him to be choosing which bell to ring first.

Rupert had been choosing, yes. But when he had reached the point of no return, he had been unwilling to ring the bells with any impurity of heart or mind. He had known the cost of his choice would be high, and a stillness in his soul had been required, a quietness, a peace. The ringing of the bells must only be performed as a sort of prayer; the prayer, he had hoped, of a righteous man crying out for deliverance.

He had prayed for deliverance, but he had been given an onslaught of mushroom men instead. Rupert hated mushroom men. They were easy enough to deal with alone, especially when newborn, still soft and damp from the soil. But this crop was well beyond counting. When Antigone froze up, his arms had already felt as heavy as mud. There had been no time to grab her focus gently. And not long after he had slapped her, the second bell was ringing.

At least he had a sword sharp enough for the task. The Dracul blade could slice steel as easily as fungus, and even the stone walls were no threat to its edge. Rupert dragged the blade down the length of a wall like he was trimming a hedge, and then he hesitated. What trap would the second bell spring? He looked up at the manor house on the hill and then down at the ruined city around him.

The tower was coated with climbing fungus, and the ruins were packed tightly with more, like a crowd outside a stadium, eager to enter. Or the hatching of a great crop of spiders.

And then something else leapt into view—an enormous golden dragon, spewing white hot flames in the ruined streets, flinging mushroom men with his wings, trampling them with his talons, toppling walls with his tail.

Wiglaf had let himself go.

And then Antigone screamed.

Rupert spun around, already knowing he was too late.

A large gray creature, skin shining in the firelight, was on all fours beside the bells. Antigone dangled, limp in his jaws. As he shook her, three others looked on, stretching clawed fingers toward her, eager for a turn.

Some fury is only possible when rage is with oneself.

Rupert reacted without thought, without fatigue, with only anger. The mushroom man lost the top of his head and then the knobby stripe that served as spine. Legs and arms followed, along with chunks of his observers. Bellowing like a true Avengel, Rupert Greeves spun and slashed and slashed and slashed until Antigone's body was surrounding with the mulch of toadstools. And then, breathing hard, Rupert dropped onto his knees beside her.

"Tigs!" he yelled, searching her throat for a pulse. "Antigone Smith, you may not die!"

She was humming. No, singing. A simple tune with archaic words. Words Rupert knew well.

"Against the wizard's evil craft," Antigone mumbled. "Against the death-wound and the burning, The choking wave…the poisoned shaft…." Her voice faded and the words were lost beneath the bells.

"Protect me, Christ, till Thy returning," Rupert finished in her ear. Glancing in every direction as the arms of gray creatures once again began hooking over the belfry walls, Rupert lifted Antigone's torn shirt to assess her wounds.

Beneath the tattered safari shirt, winged shapes, shimmering white on white, moved across a tight, untorn skin of spider silk—Angel Skin, first woven directly around Antigone's torso by armies of spiders, obedient to the charmed touch of Arachne.

"Thank the Father," Rupert said. "Arachne, you're an angel. Your ribs might be broken, but you'll live, Tigs!" Rupert jumped back to his feet and lunged with a precautionary helicopter stroke in every direction. "At least for now!"

Only a few new mushroom men had spilled into the belfry. Rupert split them all quickly.

That couldn't be all of them.

Could it? Had they really run dry?

BOOM. The tower shivered beneath Rupert's feet. Once. Twice. And then again.

A sheet of golden white fire erupted past the belfry, launching dozens of charred gray-skinned men into the darkness. The fire climbed into the night sky and was gone, but it left behind crackling flames in the beams and roof of the belfry.

Two bells were ringing. One stood silent.

Grabbing Antigone by the front of her mauled safari shirt, Rupert yanked her all the way upright, sliding his free arm behind her. Her head wobbled and she blinked slowly, trying to reenter reality…but failing.

Rupert slashed two men climbing through the trap door in the floor and then patted Antigone's cheek with his sword hand.

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Still nothing.

With a blast like a jet engine, another sheet of flame roared past the belfry. The beams were all blazing in the roof now. Silent or ringing, the bells wouldn't hang for long in a fire.

Turning in place and lugging Antigone with him, Rupert made sure he hadn't overlooked any invaders and then stabbed his sword into the plank floor, freeing up his hand to dig deep into a pocket on his thigh and pull out a little wallet of mostly broken vials. Flipping the worn leather open, Rupert managed to find a small vial that was still intact. Black flakes and green leaves drifted in clear liquid. Plucking a rubber stopper from its mouth, Rupert waved the vial beneath Antigone's nose, and then, without waiting for a reaction, he poured the entirety into Antigone's gaping mouth and clamped it shut until she had swallowed.

Within two heartbeats, Antigone jerked like she'd been shocked. Her eyes rolled and her limbs stiffened. For a long moment, she was as rigid as lumber leaning against Rupert's arm. And then just as quickly, she blinked, gasping, and her body relaxed.

Rupert gripped Antigone's shoulders and stood her upright. Then he plucked his sword out of floor and pressed the hilt into Antigone's hands.

"Keep your feet!" Rupert shouted over the bells. "And kill everything that climbs in!"

Breathing was hard. Antigone's ribs were screaming louder than the bells. The Angel Skin she wore did not prevent injury. It entered the wound with the invading blade or arrow or bullet, and then mended the wound as it exited. But cracked or broken bones were beyond its charms. And in this case, dozens of fungal fangs had torn into her side. Antigone could feel the Angel Skin working—it was a cold, buzzing, ticklish sensation in every laceration—but she could also feel where it wasn't working. Tucking her right elbow down over her ribs, she switched the sword into her left hand and stumbled in a circle, tripping over piles of gray limbs. Recapturing her balance, Antigone then leaned on the sword like a cane. Rupert was shoving on the silent bell with one hand. The skirt wouldn't budge. He banged on it with his fists and then leaned his full weight against the bell with both hands.

Mushroom men, some blackened, some missing limbs, and some on fire, began climbing into the belfry again. Rupert ignored them, focusing on the stiff bell.

"Ring," he grunted. "Ring!"

"Rupe," Antigone said. "Rupe!" The Dracul blade had a nice balance to it and felt at home in Antigone's hand, but she'd never been that great with her left hand, and more than a year had passed since Rupert and Nolan had make her train with cracked ribs. Cracked. Or badly bruised. Antigone hoped they were just bruised. Bruising would be manageable much sooner than fractures. At least if she survived the night.

This bell tower was nothing like the training rooms of Ashtown, where she had spent weeks and months working with blades of every length, all with steel far inferior to the one she now held.

An involuntary laugh gurgled out of Antigone. Ow.

"Don't do that again," she muttered to herself. "No laughing." Although it was funny.

When Rupe had forced her to train with cracked ribs before, she had thought him cruel, and she had even cried for some time after. And although she had tried to hide her pain—and her shame at the pain—from Cyrus, he had still been mad at Rupert for days afterward. Cyrus had directly challenged Rupert about his pointless cruelty. And while that training session had happened with cracked ribs on her left side, enabling her to use her dominant right hand, now she knew how to fight with rib damage.

"Pain's just noise, innit?" Rupert had said. "Treat it as false till you're through the fight and can assess the real damage."

Antigone pinned her right arm even tighter to her side, folded like a chicken wing. She needed her torso to remain as stable as possible, fighting almost entirely from her left shoulder. If she didn't, every shock of pain would break her focus…and her guard.

In the small belfry, mounded with chopped fungus, agile footwork wasn't even an option.

"On your back!" Rupert yelled. "Tigs!"

Antigone spun in place with her left arm and blade already extended. Two fungal men were lunging for her and the Dracul blade split them both at the waist. Easily. More easily than a sharp kitchen knife through mushroom. Her spin carried her all the way around, blade hissing toward Rupert's broad back where he was still working on the stiff and silent bell.

Antigone jerked her arm down just in time, burying the blade in fungus and plank beside Rupert's feet.

Yanking it free, Antigone slipped backward, barely catching herself. The searing pain in her right side was muffled by the shame she felt for almost slicing Rupert in half.

Antigone had barely felt any resistance to the sword at all. Her adrenaline had managed to climb to new highs, pumped by a jack-rabbiting heart. It wasn't enough to be wounded and fighting for her life and for Rupert's life and for the future of the world. She was also now armed with something that made her a danger to herself and—in the small, fungus filled belfry—to Rupert. Given her weakened state and her already weaker left arm, a blade this sharp was good for well-aimed, precise blows. Bad because Antigone was at her worst, stumbling and off balance, drunk on pain.

Three charred and smoking mushroom men erupted from the ladder in the floor, one after the other, all scrambling for Rupert.

Antigone jumped forward, reacting without thought, before pain could even be processed. She swung for speed, which generated more force than needed, but her control was much improved.

The blade felt warm and right in Antigone's hand, like it had been made more her. As the third monster tumbled into thirds, Rupert turned from the bells and faced her, flames crackling above his head.

"They must be rung in order," Rupert said simply. "A bell is missing. It must be."

"Missing?" Antigone asked. "How?"

Rupert didn't answer. A large, white-hot dragon rose up in the night sky beside the open belfry. Six pulsing wings knocked Antigone backward a step with warm, dry wind. Her short hair, sticky with effort and humidity, blew back from her face and dried in place, faster than if she'd stuck her head out of car speeding through a desert.

With two taloned forelegs, the dragon gripped the top of the belfry wall. Antigone raised the sword to attack, but Rupert grabbed her, pulling her further back. A spiked, golden tail wormed into the belfry and wound itself around the burning beams in the roof above the bells. A moment later, the dragon yanked the roof free of the tower and threw the entire thing away into the night, sending large portions of the stone walls with it. But the bells remained—two swinging, one still—hanging from their own crackling beam supported by what remained of the stone belfry walls. Almost delicately, the dragon leapt up onto the beam, gripping it like a parrot on a roost, stamping out the flames. Not yet finished, the

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dragon plunged his long, spiked tail down the ladder shaft in the belfry floor, splintering the ladder and filling the shaft completely.

Antigone and Rupert and a dragon stood on top of the tower, now naked to the wide starry sky. The sound of the still ringing bells softened beneath the vast expanse.

"Wiglaf," Rupert said, "we have a problem."

The dragon raised its head, and with a sound that was part waterfall and part trumpet, sent a pillar of white fire up toward the stars.

The surge of light from Wiglaf's blast revealed an enormous column of winged creatures swirling in the darkness above Rupert, Antigone, and the ringing bells. As the dragon fire passed through the storm, dozens of pairs of wings exploded into flame, and writhing, legless bodies began to tumble down toward the belfry, trailing sparks and burning feathers.

"Alright," Rupert said. "More than one problem."

Armed with rifles and revolvers, Diana Boone, Jeb, Niffy, and several of the household guards tumbled onto the shattered, glass-covered patio in time to watch the golden dragon begin laying waste to hundreds of mushroom men on the grassy slope below the house and around the ruined city. Wiglaf's dragon burned swathes through the mob with flames as bright as sunlight, while he also lashed and cracked his long spiny tail like a whip, splintering and splattering fungal bodies on impact.

But there were thousands of the earth-hatched mushroom men, and the outside of the belfry tower seethed with climbing forms in the dim light, as if it had been built from liquid stone.

A second bell began to ring.

"What'll this one wake, then?" Niffy asked. And then he cupped his hands to shout. "Oy!" he bellowed. "Wiglaf! Flap those wings and fetch our friends down!"

"He's not going to hear you," Diana said. "Not with those bells ringing, and not while he's going off like a bomb." Diana raised a short lever action rifle to her shoulder. It looked like a prop from an old western, with a worn wooden stock and a barrel that had silvered with age. She began to fire at the tower.

"Not with you shooting," Niffy said, covering his ears. "It's useless! We need to get out of the cursed place!"

Jeb and three of the household guards joined in, firing at the writhing tower surface with no specific targets.

Diana emptied and loaded her rifle three times before the dragon reached the tower and began to rise around it in a fiery corkscrew, half-climbing, half-flying, purging the invaders with flames and tail.

The firing squad all watched, warm guns in hand, as Wiglaf blasted the tower clean before finally stripping the burning roof from the belfry and flinging it into the darkness. Diana could see the bells now naked on their beam, and two human shapes still upright beside them.

Antigone and Rupe were still alive.

"Thank God," Jeb said.

"Thank Him when that golden beastie devil is safely back in his blister," Niffy answered. "Why is the third bell not ringing?"

Wiglaf lifted his head like a coyote and spewed a geyser of white fire straight up into the night.

"I think—" Diana's voice caught in her throat as her eyes swept the sky, taking in the thousands of creatures that were circling in a storm above the house and the ruins. Her hands tightened around her rifle, but Diana knew it would be useless against so many targets. She felt Jeb step closer to her.

Niffy swore loudly. The household guards ran back into the house, glass crunching beneath their boots.

"Tailed bats?" Niffy asked, rolling up the sleeves of his robe. Neither Boone answered. "Basilisks?" Niffy tried.

"Jaculus vipers," Jeb and Diana answered together.

"We need to leave," Jeb added. He tugged on his sister's arm. "Now."

"Not without Rupert and Antigone," Diana answered, pulling away. "Jeb, we can't."

"We will," Jeb said. "One way or another. We get out of this place, or we leave this life. We can't help them from here, Di. They have a dragon." Jeb looked at Niffy. With a flash of light as it became visible, the Irish monk unwound the golden patrik of the Cryptkeepers from around his waist and gripped it by the tip of the tail. The serpent grew, twisting and extending away from the monk until it was more than twelve feet long, rearing up with a head the size of a football.

Even in the craziness of that moment, the glowing, golden patrik made Diana think of Cyrus and Patricia. Where was he right now? Would she see him again, and if she did, would she have to tell him that she had abandoned his sister in a tower swallowed by a cloud of Jaculus vipers?

Three, red fat-bodied snakes slap landed on the patio in front of the patrik, all gaping their fangs and fanning goose feathered wings while hissing louder than angry tomcats.

Diana jerked backward and fired her rifle from the hip on pure reflex. The head on the central viper exploded. The wings flailed and the body coiled and writhed without purpose. Niffy's patrik struck the viper on the right directly in the face. Jeb shot the snake on the left.

"We're fine," Diana said. "We don't have to run yet."

"Di…" Jeb said.

"Not yet!" she said. "Please."

More vipers began slapping down onto the patio with a percussion like raindrops at the begin of a storm. A dozen. Fifty. Two hundred. Diana couldn't argue anymore. With her eyes up on the tower, now erupting with dragon fire like a volcano, Diana didn't fight as Jeb dragged her back inside.

Near the center of the crypt, Cyrus crouched on a flat stone, surrounded by puddles of black, trash-littered water. He was inside the ring of stone sarcophagi that encircled the roost where the ancient bell hung. The crypt, the water, and the bell were all glowing silver with Patricia's light. The little snake was wrapped around his left hand, and his thumb was firmly tucked in her mouth, preventing her from disappearing.

Cyrus rubbed the fingertips of his right hand together, smooth with the buttery residue of the coffee cake he'd consumed, punctuated with the occasional grit of sugar. Through vents and grates in the tunnels they had crawled through to get here, Cyrus could hear the voices of old women, chattering in the cloister above ground.

Ringan yawned loudly and stretched her small arms high before wrapping them back around her knees. She was perched on the edge of a stone casket above a large black pool that surrounded three of the most intricately carved stone caskets. The edge of the pool even reached the stand that held the bell.

"Do you expect a sign of some kind, child?" Ringan asked. "Is there a clock set to chime?"

"I saw what happens if I get this wrong," Cyrus said. "If I ring it too early, my sister…well, I don't want to talk about it."

"Solomon's Seat is not easily understood. Too much perception can paralyze a small creature. And humans are most definitely small creatures. Did it show you what you risk if you ring it too late?"

Cyrus nodded. A single bubble appeared in the dark water by Cyrus's toes. Cyrus stared at it until it popped. It was quickly replaced by another.

"It did," he said.

"And?" Ringan asked.

"I don't want to talk about that either. There were a lot of things I could have done, and my sister would have died in all of them. This is the choice I made, and I'd rather not screw it up. What will you do when I've rung the bell? You said it could never be rung again."

"It can't," Ringan said. "And it won't. When it has been rung, I will die."

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"What?" Cyrus looked at the little woman on the casket lid, perched at the feet of a carved medieval king. "You'll die?"

"I will," Ringan answered.

"And you're in a hurry?" Cyrus asked.

"I am," Ringan said. "Now, don't you dare pity me, lad." She smiled. "I have been in this place for quite some time. Lifetimes. I was ready for mortality centuries ago. To tell the full and complete truth, for a while after he moved on, I was furious with Brendan for leaving me here. If he wanted the bell watched, why couldn't he have done it? But I got over that some time ago. And I took up hobbies. Lots of gardening. More gardening than any woman needs." She paused. "My death may not be immediate. But if it is, do not mourn me."

"You're a transmortal?" Cyrus asked. "And Brendan is the one who made you that way?"

Cyrus didn't get an answer. The skin on his arms and back tightened into goose bumps, and he shivered, still in his crouch. What was that? His head began to throb in pain, and he shut his eyes tight. Even Patricia's soft silver light was too much for him. Invisible knives plunged into his side, and Cyrus rocked backward, splashing onto his backside in the puddle. But the moisture was the least of his sensations.

Gory visions raced through Cyrus's head, playing out inside his eyelids. A monstrous man with two mouths was ripping his sister to pieces in one. In another, she escaped with a vicious bite, but the wound sprouted teeth like tree fungus and they had consumed her completely. In another, she fell from a high tower, burning alive. And in the last, she was smothered by blood red Jaculus vipers, drowning in their coils.

Dripping sweat, Cyrus opened his eyes and threw up all his coffee cake in the black water beside him.

Ringan was on her feet, watching him, concerned.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Cyrus? Is this your signal?"

Cyrus didn't answer. Crawling forward through the cool dark water, he rose to his feet and scrambled toward the bell, grabbing onto the iron roost and using it to support his weight.

Cyrus gave the bell a push.

Nothing.

Groping up inside the bell, he grabbed the tongue, cold and rough against his palm.

He spat his mouth clean. "When I've rung it," he gasped. "How do I get off this island?"

Cyrus flung the tongue inside the bell and then immediately covered both of his ears. Rather than slowing, the ringing grew, filling every corner of the tunneled crypt and multiplying echoes.

"Now what?" he shouted, turning back to Ringan.

The small woman was in a heap beside the casket, face down in the pool.

"No!" Cyrus yelled, splashing through the water. "Wait! Not yet!"

Grabbing onto Ringan's shoulder, he tried to lift her face out of the water. Instead, he lifted the old saint entirely, as easily as if he were picking up a doll. She was as light as paper mache…and just as lifeless.

And as Cyrus stood there, cradling the woman's husk, wondering how to start her heart or her breathing, or somehow keep the centuries-old woman around for just five minutes more, she began to crumble into dust in his arms. Every clang of the bell pulsed through her body, shaking loose another cloud, shivering and sifting her down to pale dust on the water.

There was nothing he could do for Ringan. But he hoped Antigone would be better off.

Cyrus propped what remained of the old woman against the stone casket and brushed her hair back from her face.

"Thank you," he said. And Cyrus straightened. "Now what?" he asked. And he knew he was the only one who could answer.

Wiglaf in dragon form surrounded the top of the bell tower with a dome of billowing fire, but the vipers careened into his flames undeterred by their own destruction. They were falling as thick as hailstones now, their charred bodies flapping wing bones burned featherless as they writhed in drifts already well above Antigone's knees. Soon, they would be up to her hips. She had never thought being smothered by snake carcasses was a possible death, but clearly, it was.

Even so, despite having venomous half-dead and dying snakes piling up all around her, and feeling more and more certain that she was about to die, the smell was actually the worst part. Feathers gave off an awful scent, even when burned singly. But Wiglaf was torching hundreds of pounds of feathers with every snort and blast.

Antigone's eyes were streaming. Her nose was streaming, and she was forcing herself to breathe through her mouth, torching the inside of her throat and triggering her gag reflex as a result.

"Tigs!" Rupert yelled. "Grab on!" He was holding onto Wiglaf's tail, just above the sparking and sputtering spines near the golden tip.

Antigone scrambled back up on top of the snake drifts and lunged toward Rupert.

The two ringing bells were still swinging, now even with her face. The third remained frozen and stiff in place. Antigone hooked her arm around the dragon's tail beside Rupert. The hot scales peeled skin from her hands, like she had grabbed onto a too-hot pot on the stove that had been wrapped in sandpaper. But her other choice was death.

"Go!" Rupert shouted at Wiglaf, slapping the tail. "Go, Wiglaf!"

Still blasting fire, the dragon began to pulse, all six of his wings billowing heat and snake bodies in every direction.

Antigone felt herself lifting off the bed of snake dead, sliding off the tower above the bells.

"Stupid bell," Antigone said, lifting her legs to pass above the beam. "Stupid, stupid, stupid!"

And she stomped the rigid bell with her heel.

The bell skirt swung. The last tongue of Borodon clattered in its home, and the cacophony became a song with three voices. No, there was a fourth voice, too. A fourth bell singing from somewhere out of sight.

On all sides, the vipers turned and fled. The firelit ruins of the city below began to shiver and tremble and tumble into rubble with a sound like thunder.

Antigone laughed, hanging in the air from a golden dragon's tail. And then she began to cry.

END OF CHAPTER 15

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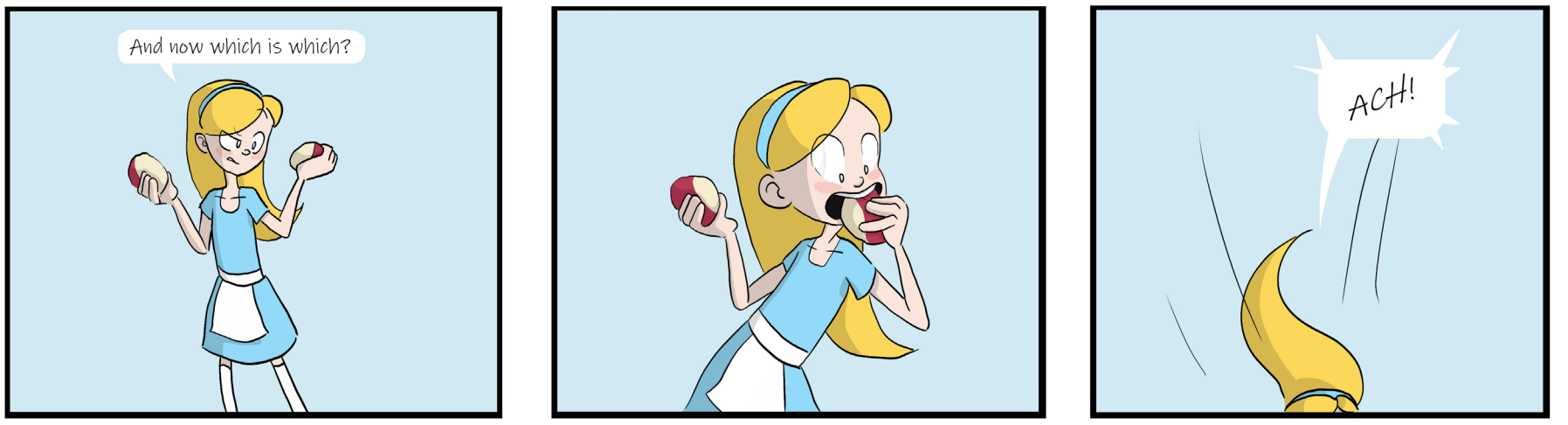
THE FUNNIES

ALICE

BY LUCIA LINN



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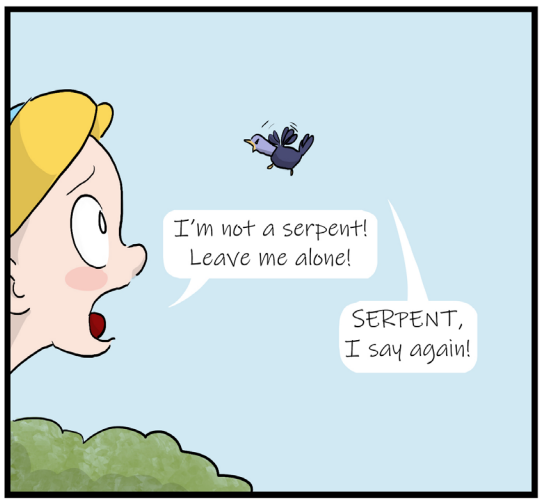
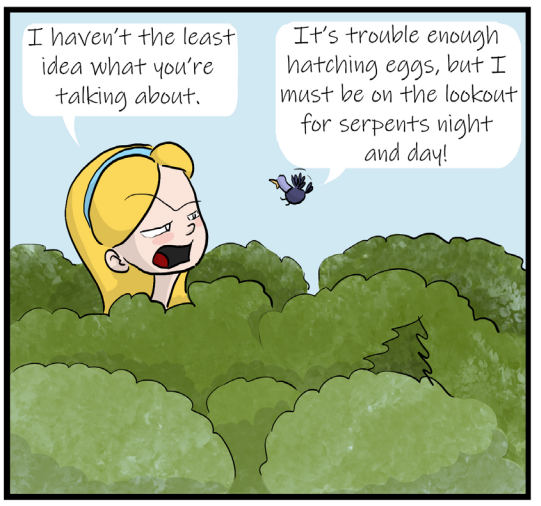
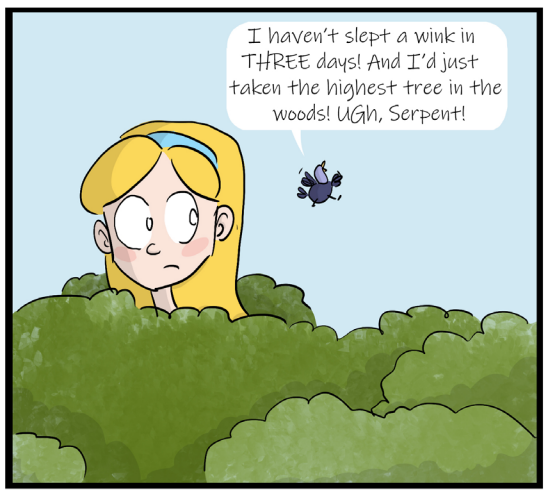
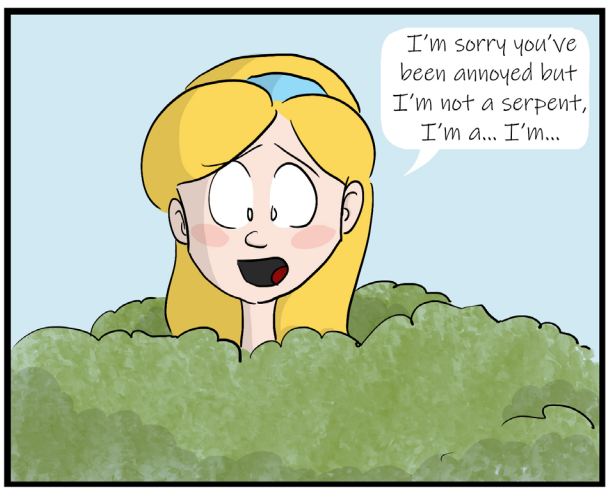
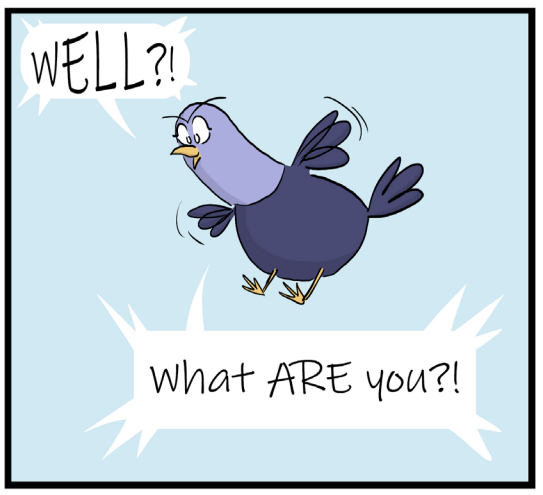
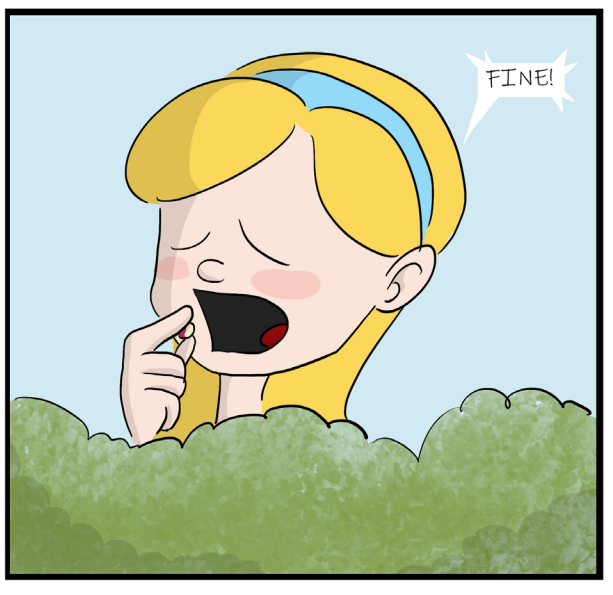


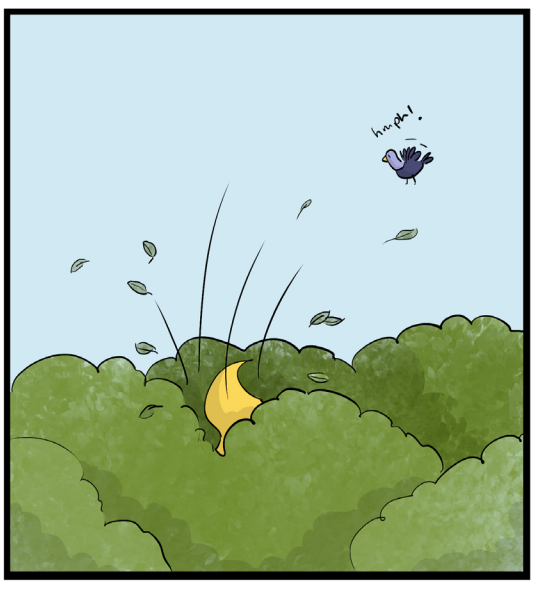

I haven't the least idea what you're talking about.
It's trouble enough hatching eggs, but I must be on the lookout for serpents night and day!











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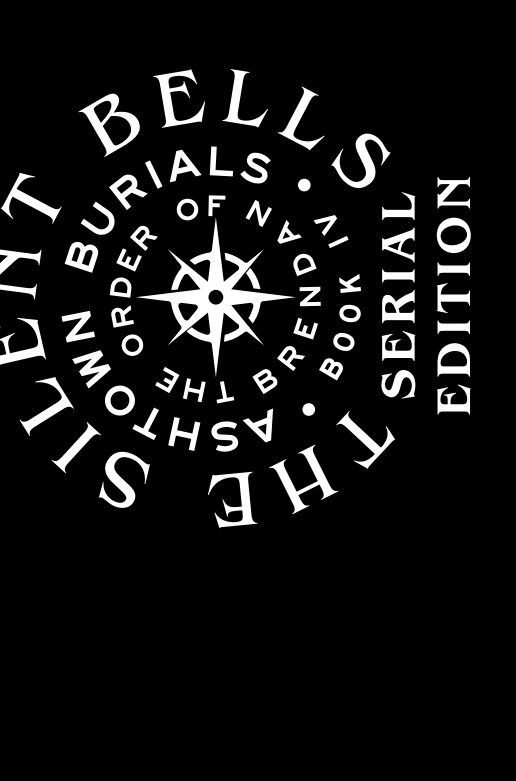
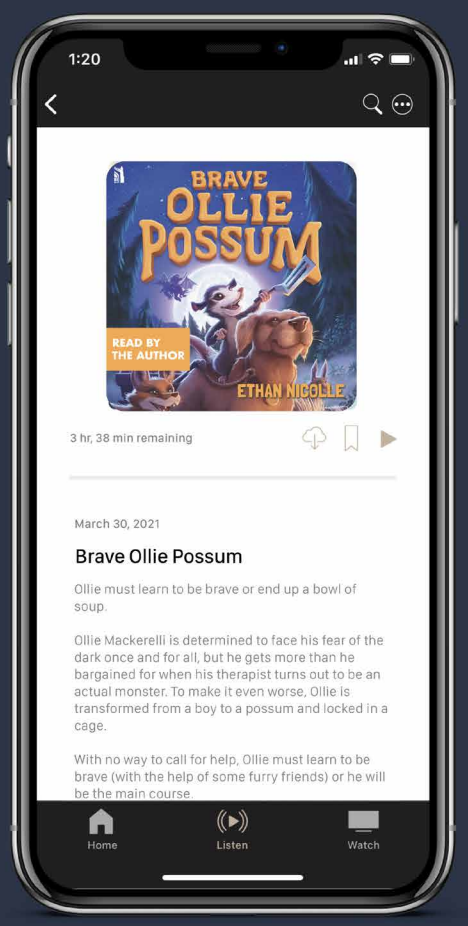
CHAPTER 15



CHAPTER 15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BRAVE OLLIE POSSUM
READ BY THE AUTHOR
ETHAN NICOLLE
3 hr, 38 min remaining
March 30, 2021
Brave Ollie Possum
Ollie must learn to be brave or end up a bowl of soup.
Ollie Mackerelli is determined to face his fear of the dark once and for all, but he gets more than he bargained for when his therapist turns out to be an actual monster. To make it even worse, Ollie is transformed from a boy to a possum and locked in a cage.
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